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# Finding Our "Happily Ever After": How Poor Fairy-Tale Parenting Breeds a Better Child

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FINDING OUR “HAPPILY EVER AFTER”:  
HOW POOR FAIRY-TALE PARENTING BREEDS A BETTER CHILD

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis shows how problematic parenting in fairy tales can have a positive influence on children by building their independence and giving them a more realistic and less naïve outlook on life. Fairy tales should not only be present in the childhood of our lives, but throughout every season. Problematic parents are prevalent throughout fairy tales, catalysts for the harm which inevitably comes to their children. However, this harm is usually not their end, as they are forced to self-parent. “All Fur,” “Cinderella,” “Snow White,” “The Juniper Tree,” and “Hansel and Gretel” create the idea that parents are sometimes a disappointment and that children should embrace independence and be equipped to handle isolation and abandonment. In reality, disappointing parents sometimes breed disappointing children, but in fairy tales poor parenting gives the child power over their own lives and the tools to overcome adversity, passing this power to the reader, as well, be they child or adult, and a plethora of lessons can be learned by both parent and child in the aftermath of these stories. These lessons help us all in our endeavors toward “happily ever after,” which, after all, has little to do with princes and princesses finding their true loves and a lot to do with hope, understanding good and evil, the importance of freedom and independence, and handling disappointment. These lessons come ironically from fairy tales’ greatest teachers—those disappointing parents.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Fairy tales are one of those rare attributions to society which hold great historic and traditional merit, yet somehow also manage to acclimate well into modern society. Their appeal is timeless and their literary value is as great today as hundreds of years ago. According to “Fairy Tales: A Compass For Children's Healthy Development—A Qualitative Study In a Greek Island,” 66 percent of parents surveyed used fairy tales to set examples for their children, 50 percent in order to soothe their anxieties usually at bedtime...All participants agreed that fairy tales represent 'instructive tools' and identified the positive effect of storytelling in their children's life” (Tsitsani et. al 269). Fairy tales play an important role in the early literacy and rearing of many children. Many of us do not need a study to let us know this. Our own childhoods provide the evidence. It would be difficult to find a person who has never heard of or read a fairy tale. Children’s books, modern movie adaptations, church and schoolhouse lessons all show how fairy tales inundate contemporary American society in a way that is impossible to escape. But between the “once upon a times” and “happily ever afters,” there are some problematic elements of fairy tales that may, at first glance, seem to have an adverse effect on a child's literary, social, or moral education. Absent fathers and evil stepmothers people many fairy tales, acting as the catalysts to what should be the demise of their children. However, these fairy tale children do not die, and as these children are forced to self-



parent, due to either abandonment, physical harm, or other ill wishes, they become more independent beings. Because of the independence gained by these fairy tale children, many of the stories create the idea that parents are sometimes a disappointment and that children should embrace independence and be equipped to handle isolation and abandonment. In real life, disappointing parents sometimes breed disappointing children, but negative parenting in fairy tales gives the children as characters power over their own lives and the tools to overcome adversity. This empowerment is, in turn, passed onto child readers as well. A plethora of lessons can be learned by both parents and children in the aftermath of these stories.

Fairy tales help us all in our pursuits of “happily ever after,” which, after all, have little to do with princes and princesses finding their true loves and more to do with hope, understanding good and evil, the importance of freedom and independence, and handling disappointment. Ironically, these lessons come from fairy tales' greatest teachers—those disappointing parents. In this thesis I argue that problematic parenting in fairy tales can have a positive influence on child readers by building their independence and giving them a more realistic, less naive outlook on life. I also show how these elements offer an important formula in bridging the often troublesome waters of one's journey from childhood to adulthood, suggesting that fairy tales should not only be present in the childhood of our lives, but throughout every season. In support of my ideas, I analyze four fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm: “All Fur/Cinderella,” “Snow White,” “The Juniper Tree,” and “Hansel and Gretel.” These four tales clearly portray the notion that poor parenting helps create a positive outlook for the children who appear in these tales. Additionally, these four tales will serve as the prototypes for a wealth of other tales that

could prove this same point. While these fairy tale characters are important in their own right, perhaps more important is the fairy tale genre as a whole which, chiefly through the Brothers Grimm, transmits lessons about social consciousness and truth that the reader can take from fantasy to his reality.

The Brothers Grimm did not create fairy tales. Instead they revised and rewrote early fairy tales that were often dark and frightful in nature. These early tales were never written for children as we know children today. According to Zohar Shavit in “The Concept of Childhood and Children's Folktales”:

The Brothers Grimm did not intend their text for children at first, although the book's title indicates the origin of the texts; they were collected from household members—maidservants--and children. The tales were first intended for adult members of the literary elite, for the accepted literary tastes...enabled them to enjoy such texts. The Brothers Grimm did not have the option of directing their works to adults and children at one and the same time, for according to the current child concept, the child was seen as an entity distinct from the adult, with different needs and capabilities of understanding. In order nevertheless to enable children to read their tales, the Brothers Grimm thought it necessary to revise them, gearing them to a child's level of understanding, particularly from a stylistic point of view. This they did starting with the second edition, in the introduction to which they outlined the principles that guided them in their endeavor to render the texts suitable to children. (327)

Despite the Grimm’s attempt to adapt the genre to something more suitable for children, it seems an original purpose of fairy tales written for adult audiences will ever penetrate through, offering a two-fold analysis of the stories still suited more for the grown-ups. Some of the literary world’s most well-known authors agree. There seems to be a snickering among these renowned authors towards the Grimms, who attempt to write with a message geared more toward children. Two quotes in particular support this conclusion in the literal sense. C.S. Lewis asserts in his “On Stories and Other Essays on Literature,”

I never wrote down to anyone; and whether the opinion condemns or acquits my own work, it certainly is my opinion that a book worth reading only in childhood is not worth reading even then. The inhibitions which I hoped my stories would overcome in a child's mind may exist in a grown-ups mind too, and may perhaps be overcome by the same means. (48)

Here Lewis connects the imaginations of children and adults, creating a bond between the two that perhaps holds in its grasp the true magic behind the fairy tale, the connection between childhood and adulthood that is often lost somewhere among the brambles of growing up. This literary bond is important because if we lose hold of what awed us in our childhood, we really lose hold of awe altogether. Childhood is a part of a person's psyche and must be revisited throughout one's lifetime. Fairy tales (and Lewis) remind us of the need to hold on to our childhoods. We cannot lose sight of our pasts simply because we grow older. In "On Fairy Stories," J.R.R. Tolkien similarly complains,

It is usually assumed that children are the natural or specifically appropriate audience for fairy stories. Is there any essential connexion between children and fairy stories? Is there any call for comment, if an adult reads them for himself? Reads them as tales, that is, not studies them as curios. Adults are allowed to collect and study anything. (11)

Here Tolkien shatters the taboo idea of fairy tales being only for the child reader, giving permission, in a way, for adults wishing to read them for themselves. Angela Carter is one such adult and her version of "The Erl-King," like her other adaptations of traditional fairy tales, proves Tolkien's point that adults can certainly be fascinated by fairy tales, perhaps even more so than children. Carter is able to twist stories perhaps meant only for the child into what is meant only for the adult. Through their musings here for an audience interested in fairy tales and through their own writings, Lewis, Tolkien, and Carter prove the point that though the Brothers Grimm intended to create a more child-friendly version of the fairy tale, the genre will ever be, even when flowered with modern

language or colorful illustrations, at its heart a deep, dark chasm of the world's unkind happenings, suited more for the realistic nature of the adult. Fairy tales create a world where even children cannot be safe from life's pain, often inflicted by those they are supposed to trust most. It is a world where its children become like adults long before they should because of the evil, or simply inept, adults in their lives that force them to grow up too fast.

There is often a definitive line between the intended audience (children or adults) of fairy tales and a case can certainly be made that the historical intention was an audience of adults, but that the Grimms, in their attempt to create more child-friendly fairy tales, opened the flood gates for centuries of fairy tale adaptations, some that cater more to the child, such as Disney, and some that cater more toward adults, like Carter's renditions. The creative liberties a fairy tale allows are endless. However, the fine line between children's fairy tales and adult fairy tales is one that should be crossed over time and again as the types of stories often overlap. Children and adults need fairy tales perhaps in different ways and for different purposes, but the *importance* of each audience's need for them is equal in caliber. The genre lends itself instructively and even spiritually to both children and adults equally, no matter the genre's moral intent. The child needs the fairy tale to help him/her overcome the tragic elements of life just as much as the adult needs it to be reminded of the hope that life affords. Inversely, the adult can gain wisdom from what he or she remembers from fairy tales as a child and the child can also gain hope for the future from the fairy tale. The two audiences come with different mindsets, thus they may read the stories differently and with varying amounts of innocence, but still the lessons each age group discerns are important, though they be

different. This is the great worth of the genre: its importance spans not only centuries, but the mind of the simplest child to the most complex adult, allowing its characters to be part of us, no matter our place in life. We are the innocent child of the fairy tale, we are also the evil adult, and we are the fantastical creatures, as well. Because we can place ourselves within these tales at any junction on our journey and become better children and adults, the lessons behind these stories are advantageous in a way that transcends time and age and makes this genre perhaps the most important, the most *necessary*, of them all.

In his seminal text “The Struggle for Meaning,” Bruno Bettelheim became an important voice in proving the essentiality of fairy tales, as he observes about children: “The more I tried to understand why these stories are so successful at enriching the inner life of the child, the more I realized that these tales, in a much deeper sense than any other reading material, start where the child unconsciously understands, and—without belittling the most serious inner struggles which growing up entails—offers examples of both temporary and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties” (271). Here Bettelheim does a fine job of explaining the way that fairy tales are able to span from the innocent parts of human nature to the corrupt parts of our nature that also abounds. It is a genre rich in beautiful transitions and analyses that can be both simple and complex, comforting and disturbing, all at once. In the same way that Tolkien and Lewis argue that the fairy tale must never be kept from the adult, Bettelheim explains how the genre (especially its dark tendencies) cannot be kept from children:

Many parents believe that only conscious reality or pleasant and wish-fulfilling images should be presented to the child—that he should be exposed only to the sunny side of things. But such a one-sided fare nourishes the mind only in a one-sided way, and real life is not all sunny. There is a widespread refusal to let

children know that the source of much that goes wrong in life is due to our very own natures—the propensity of all men for acting aggressively, asocially, selfishly, out of anger and anxiety. Instead, we want our children to believe that inherently all men are good. But children know that *they* are not always good; and often, even when they are, they would prefer not to be. This contradicts what they are told by their parents, and therefore makes the child a monster in his own eyes. (272)

These may be the most important words of Bettelheim's work. Often children are not given enough credit for understanding the dark parts of life, but this education is equal in merit to learning about the good parts. So, what if instead of a monster, the child saw himself as a hero? For a child to read a fairy tale, he or she sees that the evil in this world cannot be avoided, even within our own selves or in those who are supposed to love and care for us most. More importantly, he or she sees that it *can* be overcome. This is a useful revelation to the child reader of fairy tales because it allows him or her to accept that there are negative aspects to life, removing the blinders young children sometimes have against evil. But it is most useful in teaching the child that he or she is not a hopeless victim to this evil. Young readers can rise above it using the formulas and framework laid out by fairy tales, leading them to vengeance against evil and a newfound independence, allowing them to, in fact, be their own hero. Again, Bettelheim offers insight into this phenomenon: "This is exactly the message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form: that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence—but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious" (273). Bettelheim, like the Brothers Grimm, emphasizes the importance, for the child, of the hard truths that lie in fairy tales. He takes it a step further even by emphasizing also the importance of courage for the child to face

the evil in his life head on. What he does not mention, however, is that the true catalysts of all of these important lessons are the evil parents and stepparents within the genre. And they are prevalent. Table 1 displays the adults in thirty of the Grimms fairy tales and denotes if those adults are evil or good. If a parent physically or emotionally harms another or even places someone in harm's way because of neglect, he or she is marked as evil:

Table 1: Fairy Tale Adults in Grimm's Tales Including Children

Fairy Tale Title	Character Name	Good	Evil
The Frog King	King	X	
The Boy Who Left Home to Learn About Fear	Father		X
The Twelve Brothers	Father		X
The Twelve Brothers	Queen	X	
The Twelve Brothers	Mother in Law		X
Little Brother and Little Sister	Stepmother		X
Little Brother and Little Sister	Old Witch		X
Little Brother and Little Sister	King	X	
Rapunzel	Enchantress/mother		X
Three Little Men in the Woods	Stepmother		X
Three Little Men in the Woods	King	X	
Hansel and Gretel	Father		X
Hansel and Gretel	Stepmother		X
Hansel and Gretel	Old Witch		X
Cinderella	Father	X	
Cinderella	Stepmother		X
Mother Holle	Mother		X
The Seven Ravens	Mother	X	
The Seven Ravens	Father		X
Little Red Riding Hood	Mother		X
Little Red Riding Hood	Grandmother	X	

<b>Fairy Tale Title</b>	<b>Character Name</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Evil</b>
The Devil and His Three Golden Hairs	Father/King		X
The Devil and His Golden Hairs	Queen	X	
The Magic Table, The Gold Donkey...	Tailor		X
The Robber Bridegroom	Father		X
The Robber Bridegroom	Robbers		X
The Robber Bridegroom	Old Woman	X	
Godfather Death	Father		X
Fitcher's Bird	Wizard		X
The Juniper Tree	Father	X	
The Juniper Tree	Stepmother		X
The Six Swans	King		X
The Six Swans	Stepmother/Queen		X
Briar Rose	Queen	X	
Briar Rose	King	X	
Snow White	Stepmother		X
Rumpelstiltskin	King		X
Rumpelstiltskin	Gnome		X
The Golden Bird	King	X	
Furry Pelts	King		X
Jorinda and Joringal	Old Woman		X
The Old Man and His Grandson	Old Man	X	
The Old Man and His Grandson	Son		X
The Old Man and His Grandson	Daughter In Law		X
The Singing, Soaring Lark	Father	X	
The Goose Girl	False Bride		X
The Goose Girl	King	X	
The Worn Out Dancing Shoes	King		X
The Nixie In The Wall	Nixie		X
Snow White and Rose Red	Mother		X
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>33</b>

This chart proves that there are twice as many evil adults in these stories than there are good ones. The fact that a large number of evil adults inhabit the Grimm's stories implies



that children must often fight against disappointing adults, often parents. Of those adults on my chart that are marked as good, many are vaguely mentioned in the story and do not place key roles. Therefore, children as readers can see themselves as heroes through identification with child characters who overcome abusive adults. One can also see from this chart that overwhelmingly the adults are nameless, whereas the children are given this distinct identity, proving again their great worth, telling the reader that the children are the stars of these tales and that they will somehow overcome their less significant evil parents or stepparents. The name provides for the child validation for his or her existence, whereas their disappointing parents often strip them of this validation. Every time a fairy tale child reigns victorious over his evil adult counterparts, the children as readers learn that, they too, can overcome the evil in their lives. They also learn that they are not doomed to fall victim to this dark world even though they may become part of it someday. Fairy tales are an accessible and valuable tool important to children finding happiness in their childhood and making happiness part of adulthood. Fairy tales could not perform this function without the disappointing parents they feature. Those who doubt the benefits of reading fairy tales for children may argue that a genre filled with such evil adults would create an embittered child, but this thesis will use evidence from the stories and from critical sources to prove that the children in these tales not only overcome their mean-spirited, ill-wishing parents, but they also become better humans because of it, not bitter at all—just better.

Despite the harm inflicted upon these children due to an unfit fairy tale parent or stepparent, in the end their pain is erased and the evil ones are punished. “The happy ending is considered an indispensable component of the folktale,” explains Zohar Shavit,

“it can be said to be a distinctive feature which differentiates folktales from literary tales” (329). Though fairy tales are often filled with evil and conflict abounding, the endings usually compensate for any suffering experienced as the child/victim almost always claims victory. The message here is that if one perseveres against adversity, he or she will emerge the winner. Karma is certainly celebrated in fairy tales. This is their saving grace. Often I think about my younger days watching certain Disney movies, adaptations of the original fairy tales, and my adult self wonders why my parents allowed me to watch movies containing such evil content. Now I realize that the justification lies in the fact that for a happy ending to occur, there must be evil to overcome. Life is not all sunshine. Neither are fairy tales. They are reality dolled up by fantasy. Children need to know that evil is punished, both because it is a possible deterrent for their own evil tendencies and because they need hope that the evil done unto them in this world will be avenged. Few children dwell on the evil in fairy tales. Rather, they focus on the happily ever after. Regardless, what makes this discussion more troubling is when the evil being punished in the fairy tale is the evil committed by a parent or parents.

This thesis will also present the idea that children can still learn from fairy tales today and can apply their lessons well into adulthood. It will detail the impact of a dead or absent mother or father on a child, but most importantly the impact of evil words and actions by a parent or stepparent toward a child. It will cover how evil parents are punished and the mixed feelings children sometimes have towards their parents. The lessons these cruel parents teach can be beneficial to forming an independent, hopeful, capable child. There is a bridge to adulthood that each child must face. The journey towards adulthood is important when tapping into the lessons taught by fairy tales. More

broadly, the juxtaposition of what parents should be and what they often are in fairy tales--agents that nurture or agents of harm--is precisely what this thesis will uncover and analyze.

## CHAPTER 2

### BAD FAIRY TALE PARENTING BY STEREOTYPICALLY EVIL STEPMOTHERS AND ABUSIVE FATHERS

Fairy tale parents are often the reasons for the harm which inevitably befalls their children. This harm can be brought on by physical or emotional abuse or neglect. Often it comes by way of a passive parent who does not stand up for his or her child in the face of danger. Harm is made manifest in fairy tales mostly through stepmothers and sometimes through fathers. This chapter will detail the impact of a dead or absent mother on a child, which will include a vast discussion of the role of the fairy tale stepmother. I will analyze research on why stepmothers are considered so stereotypically evil and the great psychological attempts to defend poor stepmother behavior. My analysis will suggest that research which defends stepmother stereotypes in fairy tales are misguided. In fact, the wicked stepmother trope offers an opportunity to redefine victimized children as heroes. This chapter will detail the experiences of Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, the young boy from “The Juniper Tree,” and Cinderella and their dealings with evil mothers and stepmothers and the child’s fate despite this evil. I will also include instances of fathers as poor parents and the repercussions of their actions for the child character, using “All Fur” as an example, as well as research about daughters who are abused by their fathers. These examples, analyzed with reference to scholarly research, will demonstrate the importance of these evil characters to the genre and how their evil natures act as catalysts for the

children to emerge victorious. Ultimately, my analysis will suggest that—at least in fairy tales--that negative parenting can create positive children.

The agent for the harm inflicted on fairy tale children can come in many forms, but most often the evil stepmother is the culprit. Ultimately, this woman is punished, rewarding, in a way, the child's independence and ability to overcome such evil, despite his or her young age or supposed innocence. The evil stepmother dwells often in fairy tales, the quintessential villain tormenting some poor child or children. These women do not have the connection to their stepchildren that a natural mother would have to her child. This lack of connection perhaps makes it easier for the reader to understand her abandonment of and harm to her stepchildren, making it a necessity for the child to mature almost overnight, embracing an independence atypical of young children who are nurtured by a parent or parents, be they biological or not. The stepmother is often cast as the anti-mother. In her essay "When Love Shows Itself As Cruelty: The Role of the Fairy Tale Stepmother in the Development of the Under-Aged Reader," Gerda-Elizabeth Wittman explains this phenomenon further:

It seems unacceptable to the reader that a natural mother would treat her child with the cruelty that the stepmother does in fairy tales, subjecting the child to the dangers and perils of the outside world. This article argues that the stepmother's portrayal in fairy tales can, with the help of the psychoanalytical readings, be interpreted as a catalyst to enable the process of the child's enforced emancipation from the mother. (1)

We see this independence in many of the Grimms' tales. A young child is faced with a new stepmom after her biological mother passes away and the new woman proves to be a nuisance, at best. The child or children must then become independent, turning away from the nurturing that should naturally take place between a child and a parent and rely only on him- or herself. One of the most well-known of these stories is that of Hansel and

Gretel. Maria Tatar explains, “Like many fairy tales, the Grimms’ “Hansel and Gretel” is set in a time of famine. While the parents in Perrault’s “Little Thumbling” take their children into the woods because they cannot bear to see them starve to death, the stepmother of Hansel and Gretel is driven to abandon the children by brutish self-interest” (230). After their mother dies, Hansel and Gretel’s father takes a new wife. Remarriage is often the case in the genre, showing fathers as unqualified to take care of their children alone. Unfortunately, the new wife proves he may have been better off alone, after all. These new stepmothers also serve to highlight the father as weak, as he is often powerless to her advances and ideas, blindly going along with her evil plans. In the case of Hansel and Gretel, the family is starving and the evil plan is to abandon the children in the woods so that the parents no longer have to worry about feeding them. The father protests, but is eventually worn down by the woman: “Listen to me... Tomorrow at daybreak we’ll take the children out into the darkest part of the woods. We’ll make a fire there and give them each a piece of bread. Then we’ll go about our work and leave them alone. They’ll never find their way home and we’ll be rid of them” (“Hansel and Gretel” 236). Fortunately, the children turn out to be cleverer than the stepmom gives them credit for, but this makes her intentions no less malignant. Again, resentment takes the place of nurturing, abandonment takes the place of sheltering. Bruno Bettelheim elaborates on the child’s disappointment that can coincide with this resentment and abandonment in his essay about the story: “The mother represents the source of all the food to the children, so it is she who now is experienced as abandoning them, as if in a wilderness. It is the child’s anxiety and deep disappointment when Mother is no longer willing to meet all his oral demands which

leads him to believe that suddenly Mother has become unloving, selfish, rejecting” (273). Because of her cruel intentions and ability to nag their father until he gives in, great harm may potentially come to these children. Bettelheim believes the children act on greed. “By implying that the children are “greedy,” Bettelheim produces a one-sided interpretation that exonerates the other adults and suggests that the real source of evil in the story is nothing more than an alter ego of the children” (Tatar 38). I disagree. The hunger felt by these children is two-sided--the hunger for the love and attention a mother should provide. It is no coincidence that the witch they find when lost in the forest is surrounded by food imagery. Hunger is certainly the theme, both literally and figuratively, but not of greed. Hunger comes before the witch’s house, thus the children are not greedy. Their hunger transcends greed—it is a *necessity*. If the point of the story was to show the children as negative, the Grimms would not have had them come out victorious in the end. That they are victorious helps prove the point that the evil embodied by their stepmother, who does indeed act out of greed and selfishness, preferring to feed herself before her children, does not deter or corrupt the two, but rather causes their independence and determination to be even stronger.

One of the most notorious fairy tale stepmothers is the wicked queen in “Snow White,” the “fairest of them all” until, according to an enchanted mirror, her stepdaughter inadvertently challenges this title. The wicked queen concocts various evil plans to destroy and literally murder Snow White, to no avail, until finally, after hearing yet again from the mirror that Snow White is the fairest, the Grimm Brothers write of her jealous stepmother: “When the queen heard the words of the mirror, she began trembling with rage. ‘Snow White must die! she cried out, ‘Even if it costs me my life’” (“Snow White”

100). And Snow White does die at the hands of the evil queen. We all know of the poison apple which stands as perhaps one of the most notorious weapons of destruction in fairy tale lore. If murder is arguably the worst crime a person can commit, we can place this stepmother at the top of the criminal tier, especially since her rage is directed at the daughter of her own husband? Our fear of and disgust towards her are great. She represents a level of jealousy and immorality that is unfathomable and the confusion lies in the fact that a mother, whether biological or not, should nurture the children in her care. This evil queen undermines this natural assumption. “Snow White’s stepmother,” writes Christy Williams, “stands out for her terrifying image as the wicked queen. Since then, the wicked stepmother has become a stock figure, a fairy-tale type archetype that invokes a vivid image at the mention of her role—so much so that stepmothers in general have had to fight against their fairy tale reflections” (255). The matriarch of all evil stepmothers to follow, Snow White’s certainly leaves a lasting impression of nastiness and spite toward her stepchild. She sets the bar high, creating the stereotype and prototype for many evil stepmothers to come. Her selfishness and jealousy are great and her actions pure evil.

Another such blatantly wicked stepmother is the one from “The Juniper Tree.” There is no mistaking the psychotic nature embodied by the stepmother in this tale as she targets her husband’s son and her greed for her husband’s wealth blinds her to any compassion:

...when her eyes landed on the little boy, she was sick at heart. It seemed that, no matter where he went, he was somehow in the way. The woman kept thinking about how she needed to get her hands on the entire family fortune for her daughter. The devil seized hold of her so that she began to hate the little boy, and she slapped him around and pinched him here and



cuffed him there. The poor child lived in terror, and when he came home from school, he had no peace whatsoever. (246)

The strong language and imagery create for the reader an instant sympathy for this poor child, who is eventually killed by this vile woman, who blames it on her daughter after she places the son upright and tells the daughter it is her fault after she slaps him and his head rolls away. The evil stepmother chops him into pieces, puts him into a stew, and feeds him to his father, all while his stepsister looks on in horror, making her a victim, as well. (“The Juniper Tree” 246-247). That the “devil seized hold of her” is no gentle accusation toward the stepmother here. If the devil is the most evil of archetypes, threatening an eternity of pain and suffering, then this woman is perhaps the most evil of stepmothers the Grimms describe. And that she feeds the boy to his father is certainly a clue to support this conclusion. While Hansel and Gretel’s and Snow White’s stepmothers are content only to murder, the stepmother in “The Juniper Tree” takes the violence a step further. Just as the reader assumes there could be nothing worse than murdering one’s child, whether biological or not, our disgust rises to another level with this cannibalism and the fact that the young daughter is witness to this terror and that her mother allows her daughter to take the blame for it. The children in this story face the worst kind of parenting imaginable and the father is subject to our sincerest condolences for subjecting his young boy to such harm because he married such an evil woman. Our pity towards this father is great and our hatred for his wife unending.

Perhaps one of the best-known fairy tales is that of Cinderella. The evil stepmother is again a nasty symbol of the woman who steps in after a child’s mother has perished. Cinderella’s stepmother treats her like a slave and refuses to allow her any of the pleasures that her stepsisters enjoy. There is an endless array of Cinderella stories that

date back hundreds of years, but in most, the father's second marriage is a major focal point. Maria Tatar explains, "...the foul deeds of his wife come to occupy center stage. We see her throwing her stepdaughter into a river, instructing a hunter to kill her and recover her lungs and liver for dinner, sending her into a snowstorm wearing nothing but a shift, depriving her of food, and making her life wretched in every way" (141). The Cinderella story is a classic case of evil stepmother dismantling a child's life, exposing him or her to evil, and the child coming out victorious in the end. But in the case of Cinderella's long string of story adaptations, the stepmother is not always the evil one.

Apart from the evil stepmother, fathers can sometimes be detrimental to their children in fairy tales. The point can be made that the absent father is just as harmful as the evil women aforementioned. Had Snow White's or Hansel and Gretel's father stood up to these women and put their children first, little harm would have come to them. These fathers' passive natures make them accessories to these crimes. In fact, they are so passive, sometimes they are nearly non-existent, such as Snow White's dad. The genre focuses far more on the stepmothers than the fathers. These women are given the dominant role in their relationships with their spouses for a reason. The writers were sending a message about the problems associated with stepmothers. Gerda-Elizabeth Wittman elaborates on this:

Stemming from the competition between the stepmother and the child for the husband/father's affection, the stepmother is stigmatized as the villain in fairy tales. When considering the stepmother-child relationship, it becomes apparent that even though the stepmother is usually associated with jealousy and cruelty, her character is two-sided. When she has subversive intentions, her actions lead the protagonist to identify and strengthen his/her best qualities. (1)

In a nutshell, the stepmother, of whom Elizabeth Marshall observed: "...not a good word is ever spoken of her" (407), is portrayed negatively to, in turn, portray the child or

children positively. Hansel and Gretel might appear as quite typical children without the negative foreshadowing of their abandoning stepmother. Snow White could be thought of as quite boring and void of any personality without her evil stepmother lurking in the background, casting a darkness that allows the stepdaughter's light (and symbolically white skin) to glow even brighter in comparison. These women's placement in these stories is intentional and unapologetic. The authors use them to tip the scales in favor of the child hero or heroes of their stories. The stepmothers' black hearts and blacker actions make the stepchildren look like saints for overcoming such cruel conditions. Stepmothers are cast as the villains in fairy tales, but fairy tales also need heroes. It takes a villain to make a hero.

At the time these fairy tales were written, there was a socio-economic reason for stepmothers that went beyond father simply wanting a companion. Without the ability to financially fend for herself, a woman without a husband could be looking for one, but she may have ill intentions. In his essay "The Evil Stepmother and the Rights of a Second Wife," Christopher Eyre explains, "The search by the second wife for personal and economic status in an established family is in structural conflict with the fear and resentment of children at the remarriage of their father; in the extreme, they are in danger of complete rejection and loss of rights to inheritance" (226). The world generally did not look favorably upon such a woman. Because of financial reasons, such women often *needed* a husband, making it easy to exclude the need for romance and actual affection from the remarriage equation, which meant tricky relationships for the children caught in the middle of these relationships of necessity, relationships which often spawned great jealousy and greed within the hearts of these new wives, especially if they already had

their own children whom they wanted to get ahead, such as in “The Juniper Tree” and “Cinderella.” We see these women care much more about their biological children than their adopted ones. The new woman in the childrens’ lives is at risk for caring about money and possessions more than the children, who can be seen as a roadblock to these things, thus leaving a stepmother seen as “evil” in the eyes of the children. So, although the Grimms may have portrayed their fictional stepmothers as evil out of literary necessity, there is also some historical merit, as well, to their depictions. Regardless of the reasons why, these characters are a malicious sort, creating an archetype that would live on for generations to come. Christy Williams agrees, explaining that “As the Grimms increased the violence in their tales in order to make them more didactic, they changed these wicked mothers into stepmothers, effectively killing off the good mothers to make room for the villains” (259). No matter their purpose, these villains are an ever-present reminder to children, both literary and real, of the evil in the world that is sometimes incarnate even in those who are supposed to, by nature, nurture and love them.

There are those who believe this stereotype created by the Grimms has created issues for real-life stepmothers. In “The Myths and Misconceptions of the Stepmother Identity,” Marianne Dainton believes that

The stepmother role is a stressful one that is particularly challenging in terms of identity management. Stepmothers must combat the firmly entrenched myths of the wicked stepmother and of instant love... Thus, identity issues will remain salient for stepmothers for some time to come. Accordingly researchers and practitioners must incorporate the concept of identity when considering the experience of stepmothers. (5)

It may be true that the fairy tale archetype causes harm to the real-world stepmother, but this is simply a casualty of the purpose of the Grimms writing them this way. If they were written for children to be inspired to overcome the evil in their lives, then the good

stepmother is not to worry. The harm here could lie in children making inappropriate or false assumptions about the adults in their lives, but if the child as hero is the end goal, they will hopefully learn to build an intuition about the evil that lies around them and be able to discern between the good parents in their lives and those who mean them harm, which is not always the stepmother. Fathers can also be the villains.

When fathers are given a more prominent role, it is rarely positive. Fathers can sometimes have incestuous intentions in fairy tales, as well. In Perrault's "Peau d'Ane" and The Grimms' "All Fur," the narratives tell the original Cinderella story, as opposed to the more sanitized one eventually made famous by Disney. In these stories, the father desires to marry his daughter, for he can find no one else more beautiful, causing her to flee. Had he succeeded in his evil quest, the "evil" stepmother in this case would have been All Fur (Cinderella) herself, creating an incredibly complex representation of the idea, with irony and the taboo at its forefront. Just the idea of All Fur being her own stepmother is enough to make the reader uncomfortable. The idea creates an added negative stigma on the entire existence of the stepparent. The king is pressured to remarry for the good of the kingdom, causing his incestuous thoughts to have even more credibility in his mind. It is almost as if the writers of these stories, as well as those mentioned above, are issuing a warning about remarrying for the sake of remarrying without the best of intentions. Or perhaps these characters are used as a catalyst of evil simply because they have no real love for the children they did not birth. In the case of "All Fur," there is certainly a twisted message about the role of a stepparent. Though this story is (hopefully) not read to children at bedtime, it is still important to note its existence, as it is sometimes a reality for girls who wish it were only a fairy tale.

Elizabeth Marshall notes that “While exact figures are hard to pin down, current data suggest that anywhere from one in four to one in three girls experience sexual abuse at the hands of fathers or surrogate fathers” (403). If this be true, could it actually benefit those children who are victims outside the fairy tale realm to read of an escape from the same pain they experience?

Perhaps the idea that good conquers evil cannot save young readers from the evils of the world, but maybe it can help them be one of the good ones and suppress the sometimes evil tendencies which lie within us all. In fairy tales, evil is used as a catalyst for hope. As Hansel and Gretel find hope in their independence and the boy in “The Juniper Tree” finds hope in reincarnation, the children who read these fairy tales can, too, be optimistic when they face trials. They can be heroes in the face of their foes. Because of this, the fairy tale genre focuses young readers’ attention on the lesson that good can prevail over evil, even when that evil is in our homes.

## CHAPTER 3

### EVIL PUNISHED AND OVERCOME

For the children in these fairy tales to truly be their own heroes, their disappointing parents and stepparents must be punished and the children must emerge victorious. If the parents and stepparents who are catalysts of harm are not punished, there is no justice for the children and nothing left for them to make sense of. A child must know that in a world where evil adults exist, justice also exists in order to create some balance. The purpose of the fairy tale "...happily ever after" is to offer children this balance. When they know the bad guy cannot be victorious, they can take that hope with them into the next story, be it on paper or in their own lives. They can get through the next trial knowing there is some hope in the end and that they can be the author of this hope. The Brothers Grimm found justice for Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, Cinderella, and the boy in "The Juniper Tree." Without this, there would be no hope in these fairy tales and the villains would reign supreme, relinquishing the children as heroes. This chapter will analyze how the evil parents and stepparents in these four stories are punished. Moreover, it will remind us of the importance of children overcoming these evils, physically and intellectually. It will also discuss how the children in these tales, as well as children in reality, often have mixed feelings towards parents and how fairy tales can help the child better navigate these feelings. Most importantly, it will argue that these punishments are absolutely necessary for the proper growth of these children, despite their often violent, maybe even cruel, nature.

Later writers who helped expand the fairy tale genre were sure always to punish the evil adult. It seems as important to them as portraying stepparents as evil. Some versions include harsher punishments than others, but regardless of the degree, the child character, as well as child reader, can be assured that evil will not prevail and will also be punished. Karma has the last word in fairy tales. The writers placed a lot of importance on a child knowing that evil is always punished. In "The Annotated Brothers Grimm," edited by Maria Tatar, of nine stories that include evil stepparents, eight of these stepparents are blatantly punished. These punishments include, but are not limited to, having a millstone dropped on one's head, having one's eyes plucked out by bird, and being placed in a barrel filled with nails and rolled down a hill. All of the punishments end in death, emphasizing the severity and importance of the idea of vengeance in these tales. The only story in which the evil caretaker was not punished is "Rapunzel," where the evil woman simply disappears from the story, but Rapunzel and her new love still live happily ever after. Thus we see that the majority of, if not all, of fairy tales where parents and stepparents are disappointing and cruel end with evil punished, often at the hand of the child they wronged. Perhaps the most chilling and admittedly satisfying act of vengeance is when Snow White recognizes her evil stepmother at Snow White's wedding feast: "The queen was so terrified that she just stood there and could not budge an inch. Iron slippers had already been heated up for her over a fire of coals. They were brought in with tongs and set up right in front of her. She had to put on the red-hot iron shoes and dance in them until she dropped to the ground dead" ("Snow White" 261). There is an unwritten smirk upon Snow White's face and the reader's face, as well, when we read this chilling account. These last lines of the tale are a prime example of how the Grimms



leave the reader with a satisfying sense of justice for the child who was harmed and are also an example of how these punishments were both creative and displayed a cruelty reflecting that of the earlier behavior of the condemned.

Yes, this evil needs to be punished. But what makes this discussion so troubling is when we remember that the evil being punished is the evil executed not by monsters or ghouls, but by those caregivers who are supposed to look after and nurture these children.

Randal Albury makes an interesting point on this subject:

The cruel stepmother and fairy godmother of 'Cinderella', or the big bad wolf and the benevolent hunter of 'Little Red Riding Hood', personify for the child its own ambivalent feelings toward his parents. In real life the child cannot destroy the hated and feared aspects of a parent without at the same time destroying the real parent on whom survival depends; just as it cannot cling to the loved and admired features of a parent without at the same time being deeply disappointed in the real parent who fails to live up to the child's superhuman expectations. But in the world of the fairy tale, where the contrasting elements of the child's cruel stepmother can be humiliated and the big bad wolf annihilated without doing the least harm to the fairy godmother and the kind hunter; it is in fact with their help that the evil characters are defeated. (146)

The child's confusion over a parent discussed by Albury is a reality check. Despite the evil parent or stepparents' punishment being a triumph and sigh of relief of sorts, there can never be full relief, because the reality is also that this was the child's parent or stepparent, the one who was supposed to watch over and care for the child. The loss of this is concerning, no matter how evil the parent or stepparent. Even if it leaves the child better off, they still are left alone and with the loss of what might have been a positive relationship with a parent or stepparent. This is where fiction and reality are not so easily separated. Though the physical manifestation of vengeance and victory is attained, the emotional scars are left behind. Just because a child becomes a better person without his/her evil parent or stepparent around, that does not remove the blemish of being an

orphan. Perhaps here is where the waters of “...they lived happily ever after” get a bit murky and the fantasy seems just that.

Children often have mixed feelings about their parents, as well as themselves, which has a lot to do with the vagaries of the human experience. Sometimes mommy is nice and sometimes mommy is mean. Yesterday daddy fussed at me, but today he bought me ice cream. Young children especially can be confused, even though the spectrum is wide and some parents may lean more toward the good than the bad and, unfortunately, vice versa. The answer to this parenting problem, according to a 2016 study entitled “Day to Day Consistency in Positive Parent-Child Interactions and Youth Well-Being,” is, as the title suggests, consistent, positive parenting. The authors of the study followed 129 children, ages 9-17, both female and male, and a variety of ethnicities, and their parents using in-home and telephone interviews. Over an eight-day period, the children were asked to describe their parents’ behaviors that day and then their own behaviors, as they related to “risky behaviors...depressive symptoms...and physical health symptoms” (Lippold et. al 3586). The findings were that “Parenting inconsistency may have stronger linkages to depression give the increased risk of internalizing problems of this particular time period...In short, our results suggest that consistency in positive interactions may be an important aspect of parent-child relationships, with linkages to the mental and physical health of older adolescents, in particular” (Lippold et al 3589). This study proves that parental consistency is more concise for the well-being of children. What is even more concerning is that the parents in this study had an annual income between 110,000 and 119,000 dollars. These are not the evil parents of whom the Grimms tell. However, this proves two things: that a parent does not have to be “evil” to raise a confused and

troubled child and that if the authors of this study did not consider parents and children living at, below, or even slightly above the poverty line, imagine how those children suffer even further from parental inconsistency. A parent who is inconsistent in positive dealings with their child may not be evil, but their children certainly will not fare as well as those who are consistently positive and encouraging.

But as Albury points out, the fairy tale cleverly separates the two by creating many parents who represent either one aspect or the other, helping children make sense of the evil (and not just flawed) adults in their lives. And the big lesson conveyed in fairy tales is that the good characters are always victorious and even help to destroy the evil ones. The children in these tales are empowered because they *are* often the good characters, heroes and heroines, despite their innocence and youth. Once again we see that these children of disappointing parents become better for it, as the evil that surrounds the children only helps to highlight the good that is within them.

An excellent example of the destruction of evil by good is “The Juniper Tree.” This crime is arguably one of the most horrible committed in fairy tale history. It seems impossible to hope for a positive conclusion, but even this villain cannot get away with her crime. And even being chopped to bits and ingested by his own father cannot keep the young boy from being saved. His salvation comes in a rather elusive form as he is transformed first into a bird and then from a bird back to a boy after he drops a millstone on the head of his murderer. It is all done in a literal cloud of smoke (“The Juniper Tree” 252). Prior to her death, the woman is physically and mentally tormented as the suspense surrounding the boy’s return builds, as she describes, “I’m so frightened that my teeth are chattering, and I feel as if fire is running through my veins,” and “The mother stopped up

her ears and closed her eyes, for she didn't want to see or hear anything. But the roaring in her ears burned and flashed like lightning" ("The Juniper Tree" 250-251). Her punishment is not only her death, but also the torture that comes before it. However, it is only right that her punishment be cruel beyond measure, as she has been toward her entire family. Though void of logic and filled with fantasy, as fairy tales generally are, the message again rings true that evil will always be conquered by that which is good, even when it seems impossible, teaching children never to give up or feel defeated in the face of that which is traumatic. Some may argue that it is unhealthy for a child to see the world this way, for this is more the realm of fiction than reality, but children still need to have hope that their reality can improve, even when the odds seem to suggest otherwise. Fairy tales feed into this hopeful nature by always portraying the child as victor and with the hope that evil cannot win in the end, making for a well-informed, well-equipped child.

As important as it is that these children see the villain punished, it is even more important to know that they can *overcome* the villain. All four of the children in the aforementioned targeted fairy tales are able to overcome the evil in their families. Hansel and Gretel trick the witch into her own oven trap and it can be assumed that this witch was a metaphor for their mother, as she is no longer alive when they return home to their father. All Fur tricks her father by making a fur covering to hide under as she escapes and Cinderella's stepsisters have their eyes gouged out and remain blind for the rest of their days. The boy from "The Juniper Tree" is reincarnated, proving his pure soul has placed him on the side of the good forces of the universe, as he is able to come back and punish his adversary. These feats, both physical and intellectual, go far in proving to these

children that they are fully capable of overcoming the evil in their lives. The trauma they face serves as a catalyst for a forced independence that helps to make them better people. It is equally important to note that the positive influences surrounding them also serve to make them better. Hansel and Gretel have each other and though they find independence, they also learn the significance of leaning on those you can trust, even if there are no adults around to lean on. The boy from “The Juniper Tree” finds the same sort of comradery with his sister, who is his hero in a way because of her love for him and her companionship. Both pairs of siblings possess a powerful unconditional love for one another that also offers them hope in times of despair and companionship when they are most threatened by loneliness. These bonds help to strengthen their chances of victory over evil and though this evil teaches them much, the good that surrounds them is also filled with valuable lessons.

The most noteworthy lesson in all of this discussion of bad parenting is that it gives the hope to the children who suffer and equips them with the tools to handle isolation and abandonment. Though they suffer at first, their happy endings have a lot to do with saving themselves. Extreme traumatic harm can cause the victim to give up or to work harder than they thought possible to find their own freedom. Fairy tale children fall in the latter category. They are heroic examples for children everywhere and their newfound independence in overcoming the bad parenting done to them helps to make them the best version of themselves.

Tatar asserts in her preface to “Annotated Brothers Grimm,” “The spectacle of punishment, in all its grotesque twists and violent turns, did not make the Grimms at all uncomfortable. In fact, it seemed to provide value-added for a volume designed to help

parents teach children how to distinguish between virtue and vice” (li). This difference between good and evil is obviously consequential when it comes to punishing the evil in these tales. The punishments are blatant and at the hands of the child victims in many cases, as they push a witch into an oven or oversee a hot iron shoe dance. The punishments end in death and seem to satisfy our thirst for vengeance against these awful creatures. The end result is to let children know that evil parents exist, but that they will also get what karma has coming to them. If these vicious, sometimes even murdering, parents came out victorious over their children, then there would be an entirely different moral to these stories. Instead these parents are punished with punishments suited to their crimes and the lesson is that no parent that awful can get away with such crimes. No matter how long and sad and unendingly hopeless the story may seem, good will always win in the end. As Moshe Shokeid perfectly puts it, “...fairy tales are parables of human triumph against an impossible world” (223).

## CHAPTER 4

### DISAPPOINTING PARENTS CREATE BETTER CHILDREN

The previous chapter affirmed that evil caregivers in fairy tales are always punished and that these punishments are both justified and necessary to the purpose of creating better children. Bad parenting does not simply end with the death of the punished parent, but can also create the kind of independent, conquering child Bettelheim speaks of, and this chapter relates the valuable lessons taught by these cruel parents, such as how to overcome isolation and abandonment. It will detail the hope that is necessary for a child to overcome a hard life brought on by a cruel parent and how fairy tales are the perfect catalyst for this hope, using various examples from the four fairy tales I have chosen for this thesis, as well as scholarly work touching on the subject, connecting it all to a realistic impact for those child readers who may face adversity in their own lives. Fairy tale bad parenting helps these children bridge the chasm between childhood and adulthood, as they consider what kind of parents they wish to become, which is hopefully the opposite of the poor example set for them.

Disappointing parenting in fairy tales breeds children who are anything but disappointments. This is a stereotypical rejection of the parents' choices by the child.

Wittmann explains this in the case of "Hansel and Gretel":

Separation from the mother can be very traumatic, yet, as can be seen in *Hansel and Gretel*, it is necessary for the child to learn to find help from within him/herself. As the child separates from the mother and forms his/her own identity, the mother is no longer able to fulfill all his/her needs. Even though both

parent and child might be hesitant to allow for this process at first, it is necessary for both of them to release each other in order to facilitate the development of separate identities. (9)

Wittmann makes the point that separation is necessary throughout the parenting process. Though some will, most children do not face poor parenting to the extent of evil. But the creation of this autonomy for child characters in fairy tales proves helpful in creating several valuable lessons for children and the importance of independence is one of them. A child completely attached to a parent or parents will have trouble when the time comes to leave home and live life on his or her own. But a child who practices or even imagines independence from their parents, who learns to do things for him- or herself throughout childhood and adolescence will fare far better and see the value in this freedom when the time comes to be on his or her own. Wittman goes on to explain this very idea perfectly: “As Hansel and Gretel are able to provide for their family, so is the young reader empowered to be an independent valuable member of the family. Even though obstacles might seem great initially, they are never unconquerable to the child” (9). In this way, fairy tale bad parenting teaches the child character and the child reader the independence needed to be psychologically healthy, functioning successfully on his or her own. Hansel and Gretel are the perfect example of independent children created by unfortunate circumstances because of poor parenting. When they first hear of their parents’ plot to leave them in the forest, Hansel is forced to be clever and concocts a plan to save them, while also consoling his sister. He goes outside and gathers the shining rocks in their yard to use the next day to help them find their way home, then whispers to his sister, ‘Don’t worry, dear little sister. Sleep peacefully. God will not forsake us.’ And he went back to bed” (“Hansel and Gretel” 236). Gretel is also forced to find her own independence when



the witch has her brother locked up. For weeks, she grieves over the thought of Hansel being eaten by the witch, but eventually, when the opportunity presents itself, is clever and lures the witch to her death in her own oven. These unfortunate children are also able to loot the witch's treasure and find their way home through a difficult forest. This behavior suggests that they become more confident in their independence as the story continues. In the end, "Their worries were over, and they lived together in perfect happiness" ("Hansel and Gretel" 241). The two children emerge even better than they were in the beginning because of the newfound independence brought on by a traumatic situation due to disappointing parenting and abandonment.

Another important facet of this independence can come from the abandonment of a parent or caregiver because of their death, which is certainly a reality beyond the fairy tale that must be addressed, as this can be one of the greatest disappointments for a child to overcome. Fairy tales have no shortage of mothers' deaths. This is how we get so many stepmothers. Wittman speaks on this topic at great length, as well, relating it to Cinderella:

The evil stepmother is opposed by the good fairy godmother. In this version, the reader deals simultaneously with two mother images. Due to domination and mistreatment by stepmother, the heroine is compelled to break away from the paternal home in order to find happiness with a partner...As it is to be expected, adolescents are not completely left to their own devices in their search for identity. In the case of *Cinderella*, the fairy godmother appears when needed to aid her goddaughter, but allows her to function as autonomously as possible...The biological mother has to be seen, at least partly, as evil, to motivate the child to break away from her and become independent. In the Grimms' version of the story, the splitting of personalities takes on an even more interesting form. When the mother knows that her death is near, she promises *Cinderella* that she will look after her and guide her, even after her death. Instead of a female fairy godmother, sexless pigeons sent by the mother take on the role of Cinderella's guides. Even though Cinderella can no longer see her mother and a certain distance is established, she knows that ultimately she can still rely on her for comfort and assistance if necessary. (9-10)

Wittman makes two important points here: one is that the evil deeds of Cinderella's stepmother cause her to make a break from her family and strive to make a new, happy family with another. The second is that though sometimes loneliness seems unending when in the care of someone who does not care, help can come in the way of random beacons of kindness or from the memory of one who was good, but who has passed. Children can find strength in the memory of those loved ones who are no longer with them, imagining these loved ones are still present and helping them along. Fairy tales are synonymous with fantasy, with what a child imagines. And when a child imagines, these daydreams can be bad, but they are often good and create a better fictional life for the child than that child's reality. Such dreams can include the fantasy that a loved one who has passed is back in the child's life. In this way, the lost loved one is never truly lost.

Cinderella's fairy godmother can be seen as a form of her mother reincarnated as a guardian angel of sorts. Though the young girl has faced a terrible loss at a young age, her mother's spirit can never be lost and can still help her along the way, especially as she fights for her freedom from the evil woman who took her mother's place and creates even more darkness in a place of loneliness. The same can be said of modern films version of Cinderella. In *Ever After*, Danielle (Cinderella) loses her father after getting her new stepmother and is left parentless altogether. She faces severe oppression at the hands of her mom's successor but is able to overcome it due in part to her free spirit, but she also has her father's still-guiding hand. The last present her father gave her is the book *Utopia*, and she quotes it openly and lives by it daily. It is her tangible proof of her dad's spirit pushing her onward towards the victory that is inevitably hers as she overcomes evil and becomes queen.

Kenneth Branagh's 2015 film adaptation *Cinderella* has a similar theme. Before young Ella's mother dies, she leaves Ella with a saying that is repeated throughout the film: "Have courage and be kind." This advice, though not tangible, is a valuable last gift from a parent that lasts a lifetime, though practicing it can be hard at times. Even though Ella is treated horribly by her stepmother and stepsisters after Ella's father's death, she keeps their house together, as a gesture to its past, a place where Ella, her mother, and her father lived in such happiness when she was a child. She repeats the phrase over and over to get her through the tough times and she repeats it to the prince when she meets him, as well as when she sees him at the ball, which contributes to him falling in love with her. Not only does she repeat the phrase, she lives it, displaying kindness and courage wherever she goes and in whatever she does. It is easy to practice kindness and courage when life is good. To do so when life is troublesome shows the mark of a truly good person. This is another prime example of a child who deals with the death of a loving parent, but is able to keep her memory alive to help her cope with and, as best she can, survive this great loss. The words Ella's mother mutters on her death bed could also act as a mantra for any child facing loss or evil parents or stepparents. Kindness is something the child should not allow to be stripped from them and they must have courage to overcome the evil that surrounds them. A child reading or watching such a story who has undergone tragedy in their own lives or will face such at a later stage can take a valuable lesson from such stories. Whether it is the abandonment of an evil parent or a good one, a child can still press on alone and find help along the way. These coping mechanisms are critical to a child's emotional survival following a traumatic experience and can be learned in great measure by reading fairy tales.

Bettelheim also has something to say about the importance of the child's independence, but he emphasizes that the child must learn to cope with his more day to day problems, which can also be solved using fairy tales. In "The Struggle for Meaning," he relates:

In order to master the psychological problems of growing up—overcoming narcissistic disappointments, oedipal dilemmas, sibling rivalries, becoming able to relinquish childhood dependencies; gaining a feeling of selfhood and self-worth, and sense of moral obligation—a child needs to understand what is going on within his conscious self so that he can also cope with that which goes on in his unconscious. He can achieve this understanding, and with the ability to cope, not through rational comprehension of the nature and content of his unconscious, but by becoming familiar with it through spinning out daydreams—ruminating, rearranging, and fantasizing about suitable story elements in response to unconscious pressures. (271)

Here Bettelheim reaches into the child's psyche to explain the importance of fairy tales in regards to rearing children or, if you will, children rearing themselves. His claim is that the child is able to take what he reads and apply it to his own issues, even those he may be unaware of. An important part of literature is that it often provides a facet of examples and/or wisdom that we can use to better our own lives. It is no different for children.

When the child reads of a problem solved in a story, he or she may subconsciously apply what they have learned to a similar situation faced later in his life. Bettelheim explains why fairy tales are the best literature through which this can happen, writing that children need to make sense out of confused feelings, but need suggestions for how to deal with this inner turmoil and complicated emotions. Bettelheim asserts that to do so, the child needs a "moral education which subtly, and by implication only, conveys to him the advantages of moral behavior, not through abstract ethical concepts but through that which seems tangibly right and therefore meaningful to him" (270) .

These ideas and examples may seem silly at first glance: pushing a witch into an

oven, making a fur covering to escape an incestuous father, appearing at a ball with glass slippers and a ball gown to rival the best of the best, getting kissed by a prince who happens upon you while you are enclosed in your glass coffin. But, if we look at the deeper meanings, a child has learned the following from these examples: always be a step ahead of your enemies and, when necessary, give them a dose of their own medicine; be clever when planning an escape and do not fear the unknown when what you know is no longer a viable option, because freedom is always the best option; always look your best and never think yourself worse or better than another, but let your confidence always shine through; and death is not necessarily the end of things—sometimes those who find us along the way can show us the way to a new life. Such lessons are of pivotal importance for children and, with proper imagination, display the vast importance of fairy tales on an impressionable young mind. The values and lessons taught, especially when it comes to a child's independence, are invaluable. Disappointing, sometimes evil parents, are the catalysts for these fairy tale lessons, helping to create better children.

In addition to independence, fairy tales can help children become less trusting and naïve. In his essay "Toward an Anthropological Perspective of Fairy Tales," Moshe Shokeid makes this point:

Through these tales, which depict perverted relationships within the family—the closest circle of intimate relationships—the child learns that despite all the moral teachings and the wide range of appropriate behavior hammered into him, he cannot take his world for granted—especially people. The world may lay in wait for him at any social encounter and overpower him unless he is constantly on his guard. The loving "grandmother" may devour him and "mothers" may turn into "stepmothers" or simply into "bad mothers." (229-230)

He continues this thought, explaining that these social realities grasped from reading fairy tales are something the child never forgets and creates for him a reality "where most

relationships are contractual” and that the child reader can sometimes empathize with the child in the fairy tale because of “...personal encounters with strangers. These experiences may have entailed a sense of parental desertion followed by fear and suffering” (229-30). Shokeid makes a valid point here that bad fairy tale parenting helps to create a child that is ever aware of his surroundings, always conscious of the possibility that evil lurks nearby. The settings of these stories help to create this awareness. The forest and its culminating, eerie darkness usually comes before an evil encounter, such as when Hansel and Gretel are left by their parents or when Snow White runs away from the Huntsman.

Even though good things can still be found in the forest, such as the Seven Dwarfs or the seemingly wonderful house made of sugar, even these things can be tricks. Snow White’s evil stepmother discovers her, despite the protection and comfort of the dwarves and the candy house is, in fact, the home of an evil witch. Therefore, even when child characters let their guards down, they can still be harmed. Through these experiences, they learn not to trust even that which might look safe at first glance, creating within them a dwindling naivety that will serve them well in the real world. In the same way, the child reading “Snow White” learns not to accept an apple without understanding the possibility it is poison. In his article “The Cultural Evolution of Storytelling and Fairy Tales: Human Communication and Memetics,” Jack Zipes reminds us that “Fundamental to the feel of a fairy tale is its moral pulse. It tells us what we lack and how the world has to be organized differently so that we receive what we need” (14). Is it sad that these children learn not to trust to “receive what [they] need?” In a way, yes. But in many other ways, it prepares children to be aware of the presence of evil in the world. Because of this heightened sense of awareness, children are well-prepared and primed to defeat any evil

action directed toward them. Yes, these children are independent and know they can tackle life without direction from the evil adults who did the children wrong, but they also know they can get through any future issues because they are ever-ready to dodge whatever evil life throws at them. Fairy tales create survivors.

Such survivors are the two children in “The Juniper Tree.” After going through a horrible ordeal with the most horrible of mothers, her death is a comfort. Little brother is transformed from bird back to boy and “He took his father and little Marlene by the hand, and the three of them were overjoyed. Then they went into the house, sat down at the table, and dined” (“The Juniper Tree” 252). Earlier in the story, the father dined on his very son, cooked in a stew by his stepmother after she had decapitated him. The fact that they are able to dine again after her death is a triumph, showing that they are left with no physical *or* emotional scars, as the characters are able to move on so quickly. Evil is seen for what it is, it is conquered, and the characters are left to live their best lives, free of the one who was holding them down. It is not hard to imagine that the children in this story will be amazing parents someday, as they have had the perfect example of all the things a parent should never do or be. These children are survivors in the truest sense, as they are able to overcome the most heinous and hideous crimes done to and in front of them and come out better for it in the end. It is the ultimate revenge to not only get beyond the evil done to us, but to also rise above it. In the four stories recounted in this thesis, the children are better because of the independence and confidence they gain at being able to overcome the odds and defeat a disappointing caregiver.

These stronger, more independent children will most likely become better parents, the opposite of the poor example set for them in their childhood. Zipes explains, “Fairy

tales are informed by a human disposition to action—to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs, while we also try to change and make ourselves fit for the world. Therefore, the focus of fairy tales...has always been on finding magical instruments, extraordinary technologies, or powerful people and animals that will enable protagonists to transform themselves along with their environment, making it more suitable for living in peace and contentment” (2). If we get right down to it, fairy tales were created to make our world a better place. Part of this is creating not only better children, but children who will someday be better parents than their own parents. Data suggests that many children who grow up with abusive parents will themselves become abusive as parents in the future. A recent *Washington Post* article entitled “Abusive Parenting Styles Can Be Inherited. Here Are Five Ways to Break the Cycle” explains,

Studies have shown again and again that harsh physical and verbal punishments are ineffective and harmful and can ignite behavioral and physical problems that follow children into adulthood. Given all of the evidence, why are people still doing? According to a study by the University of Washington’s Social Development Research Group, adults who endured physical and emotional abuse as children are more likely to repeat those patterns with their own offspring. The authors noted that poor parenting, including physical and emotional abuse, frequently was observed across three generations, suggesting that those choices can affect families for decades.” (Szcypinski 1-2)

Szcypinski also cites a 2013 Harris Poll in which 81 percent of parents think that “hitting is a sometimes acceptable form of discipline, and two-thirds said they had used it with their children” (1). If all of this is true, then how can fairy tales be a positive educator and help create children who become better parents? Certainly there are children who do not fall victim to the stats in the *Washington Post* article, as they are able to rise above and become the opposite of their parents. Fairy tales can help to make this a more prevalent phenomenon because of the experiences detailed in this chapter. These more



independent, less naïve and trusting, fairy-tale educated children are learning one valuable lesson when it really comes down to it: that bad parenting can be overcome, both in stories and in real life. Zipes believes that “Fairy tales begin with conflict because we all begin our lives with conflict” (2). Equally important to note is that they do not *end* with conflict. Because of this, children learn that their lives do not have to either. Children subjected to pitiful parenting can still become productive and powerful. The bridge from childhood to adulthood can be a positive one if we keep the lessons of fairy tales ever in our memory.

## CHAPTER 5

### FAIRY TALES ARE NOT JUST FOR CHILDREN

This final chapter will talk more in detail about the bridge to adulthood that each child must face at a pivotal point in life, as well as provide a synopsis of previous chapters. These tales have origins that lend themselves well to stories that relate to all ages. Child and adult, though different, are connected in very important ways. The child we were has great bearing on the adult we will become. The adult we will become forever remembers the child we were. Whether our memories are fond or miserable (or more commonly, perhaps, a mixture of both), fairy tales can help bridge the gap between these two parts of one's life. An important part of this gap lies in the lessons the fairy tale can teach both children and adults. The result of the bad parenting found in these stories can act as the greatest lesson of all. The children in these tales *are* the good and the hope for the future, but they could not get there without the turmoil brought on by the evil parents in their lives.

Negative parenting in fairy tales gives children power over their own lives and the tools to overcome adversity, passing this power to the child as reader, as well. Fairy tales help shape who the child becomes as an adult. The value of independence is not the only lesson taught by fairy tales. As Randall Albury observes, "Fantasy stories, then, offer the child a way of coming to terms with its own inner life and its relations to others, which is in accord with the child's own essentially magical view of the world...The need for

fantasy, if repressed in childhood, will return with renewed force at the most inappropriate time—that is, when the conditions of childhood have passed” (146). The point here is that what the child learns in terms of what fairy tales can teach him is not something to be missed in childhood. Fantasy helps create a softer adult. As the world hardens him, he must have some cushion to fall back on. J.R.R Tolkien wrote about this in his work “On Fairy Stories,” namely stating:

It is true that in recent times fairy stories have usually been written or “adapted” for children. But so may music be, or verse, or novels, or history, or scientific manuals. It is a dangerous process, even when it is necessary. It is indeed only saved from disaster by the fact that the arts and sciences are not as a whole relegated to the nursery; the nursery and schoolroom are merely given such tastes and glimpses of the adult thing as seem fit for them in adult opinion (often much mistaken). Any one of these things would, if left altogether in the nursery, become gravely impaired. So would a beautiful table, a good picture, or a useful machine (such as a microscope), be defaced or broken, if it were left long unregarded in a schoolroom. Fairy stories banished in this way, cut off from a full adult art, would in the end be ruined, indeed in so far as they have been so banished, they have been ruined. (12)

Here Tolkien creates a solid argument that fairy tales left only to children do not do their full duty. This great author and scholar of a genre that is a direct extension of fairy tales is certainly adamant in his opinion of the vast importance of fairy tales in adulthood.

Each of the fairy tales mentioned in this thesis hold great merit for adults, especially adults who will become or are already parents. All Fur/Cinderella provides for the adult a perfect example of how to and how *not* to parent. Cinderella’s biological parents give us an example of consistent love and adoration of a child that is stripped only with their deaths. Though their deaths cause sadness and abandonment, they do not break Cinderella. She is able to survive this and the torture and massive negative change that come after *because* their love and adoration carry her through and give her the courage to survive. As parents, this is our ultimate goal. Parenting children who will go

on to live without us both independently and courageously means a parenting job well done. On the other hand, parenting like Cinderella's evil stepmother, allowing bitterness and jealousy to be projected on to children, places a strain on a child and can cause their lives to be miserable, despite the child's strength. Cinderella's stepmother is certainly more concerned with her biological daughters. Parents should always want their children to get ahead in life, but teaching them to do so in a dishonest manner and while hurting others, as the stepmother does with her daughters in an attempt to get them married to the prince, creates children who are corrupt and unsuccessful.

Snow White's stepmother's parenting style is even more destructive than Cinderella's. She goes beyond abuse to murder. She is another great example of what bitterness and jealousy can do when it is projected from parent to child. Snow White is sent into exile, barely escaping death, and must forfeit her kingdom simply because her stepmother is jealous of her beauty. Death eventually finds her at the hands of the evil woman and is only relinquished by the kiss of the prince. There is no good parenting here to give Snow White strength. Her consistent and thorough goodness is what carries her through, even though her trusting nature gets her killed by the poisonous apple. The lonely cabin in the woods is symbolic of the isolation and ever-present danger a child can feel when dealing with an abusive, jealous parent. There is no easy escape.

In "The Juniper Tree" and "Hansel and Gretel," we see two parenting examples that are at odds with one another. Both have an evil stepmother and a dad that is alright, but that does not go out of his way or, in the case of "The Juniper Tree" does not realize he needs to protect the children, despite marrying an awful woman. Much can be learned by adult readers of these stories because of his lackadaisical parenting. These stories also

have the evil mother or stepmother, but unlike Cinderella and Snow White, the children in these stories have a “good” parent among them, as well. The problem is that the fathers in these stories are passive. They allow their wives to do whatever they want or are unaware of their wife’s behavior, allowing their children to come to harm. The more passive of the two is Hansel and Gretel’s dad who brings his kids into the woods knowing that his wife wishes to abandon them there. It is as if he gives in to her simply because he is tired of arguing with her or feels he cannot win, despite feeling being upset at the prospect of abandoning his children, as the story recounts, “She didn’t give her husband a moment’s peace until he agreed to the plan. “But still, I feel sorry for the poor children,” he said” (“Hansel and Gretel” 236). There is nothing noble about harming one’s children simply to escape nagging. Parents should ever be mindful of the harm that can come to their children and stand up for them in the face of any danger, no matter who the victimizer might be. The father here is a victim, as well, but as an adult, he had a choice to leave with his children and he chose to stay, putting his children in harm’s way. Thus, he does not deserve pity.

Modern-day parents, though often not murderous or even abandoning of their children, face daily parenting dilemmas. These parents often place too much pressure on their children, as Cinderella’s evil stepmother, or allow their children to have no boundaries and are too nonchalant about their well-being, much like Hansel and Gretel’s father. Each day, my students remind me that many of their homes have no structure and no one is there to shield them from violence, hunger, and other evils. There are countless tales of children whose parents force them to be involved in a sport or other activity the child does not want to be a part of, often making the child depressed and resentful of their

parents. Fairy tales teach that though these negative behaviors may not be the same caliber of evil as the awful fairy tale parents and stepparents, they still harm the child. Positive examples of fairy tale parenting, such as those of Cinderella's biological parents, can provide these parents with a resource for how to be better parents and perhaps save their children from the torture and misery like that faced by fairy tale children.

So if fairy tales are important for children *and* adults, which is the more important? Perhaps the more appropriate discussion is the value of a fairy tale education throughout one's entire lifetime. To live a life with no problems or even trauma is near impossible. How we learn to handle such situations is of pivotal importance, but such an education is not formal for us unless we seek it out or study it. Therefore, the fairy tale takes on an important role as educator (or parent, if you will), helping to bridge the gap between childhood and adulthood and beyond. As a child, we see the world as concrete, but we attach much emotion to this perception. The fantasy elements of fairy tales—the magical transformations, talking animals, resurrections—all relate well to the child that is emotional and hopeful and believing. He needs to believe the world is inherently good and that what evil there is will be punished in due time. He needs to believe the impossible can be made possible. The child that faces evil needs this to push through the unfortunate difficulties he faces. The child who faces evil inevitably will need it in preparation for the problems that he will face as an adolescent or adult. In a way, the fairy tale does the parenting a child needs in place of the parent who cannot, will not, or does not quite know how. Stories can teach lessons a thousand times better than any lecture.

As adults, emotions and hopefulness are often replaced by doubt and insecurities about the world around us. For this reason, the fairy tale bank in our conscience becomes

important as we need some faraway “happily ever after” to cling to. Fairy tales also become important as the adult turns parent and sometimes forgets what it was like to be a child. These stories help to instruct in a way the child can understand. The parent becomes the purveyor of these messages. The magic of this lies in the fact that as we read these stories with child upon our lap, we read them to ourselves, too, and that gap in age between child and mother or father grows smaller and smaller, as we are reminded of where we came from in our education and that perhaps it is a good place to go back and visit from time to time. It can also remind the parent of those facets of parenting where he falls short. A parent who reads to his child is probably no incestuous father or evil stepmother, but the faults we find in these can still remind us of our own, smaller, but still important faults. Maybe we do not wish death or abandonment upon our offspring, but these crimes can perhaps remind us to spend more time with our children so they never get even an ounce of the bitter taste of abandonment. And by seeing what these fairy tale children lack, hopefully our own children will realize the good they have in their lives—the juxtaposition between the disappointing fairy tale parent and the parent who makes his child feel like a hero every day. The tales are also a reminder of those punishments that can befall us if we harm our children in any way, whether physically or emotionally.

Despite parental pitfalls, children can still be victorious. The parents in the four fairy tales this thesis recounts are heinous, conniving and murderous. They represent the worst that children have to face, but they also are punished in the end and their children come out on top and stronger than they were before. These children learn invaluable lessons about independence and trust. They grow up quickly and they feel more pain than

a child should have to, but the Grimms prove time and again through these children that bad fairy tale parents do, in fact, breed a better child. Yes, the parent is gone in the end, but the lessons they leave behind are perhaps even greater than those of good parents, as the children who survive awful parents are just that—extraordinary survivors.

This thesis revolves around these awful parents and extraordinary survivors. It details the Grimms' purpose and how children today can still learn from their tales, while also explaining the role of the stepmother and the stereotypical evil which consumes her, as well as the problem with absent and unsuitable fathers. It also shows how the children who fall victim to these poor parents are heroes who overcome the evil that surrounds them, using examples from "Cinderella," "Hansel and Gretel," "Snow White," and "The Juniper Tree." In addition, this thesis explains that the punishment of the terrible parents in these stories are both just and necessary so that children can find some order in the world and know that evil cannot always prevail. Finally, it expands on the theory that bad parenting creates children who are both independent and survivors, who will hopefully be better parents, despite the bad example set for them.

An important part of the fairy tale is in the lessons it can teach both children and adults. The research and commentary provided throughout this thesis opens up a discussion of parenting that is complex and even confusing. It lends itself to a social discussion that can go beyond the literary, but a literary discussion that probably cannot be separated from the social aspect. What has more bearing on who we become—nature or nurture? It is an age-old question that has been asked time and again. Social research has been greatly amassed because of this question. Our finest literary pieces often revolve around it, as well. Fairy tales do not provide the answer, but they do provide example



upon example of the possibility of a child turning out just fine, despite the neglectful, abandoning, and cruel parenting. I hope what my research and ideas have done here is to prove that the genre, despite being rooted in fantasy, can act as a prototype for defying the stereotype that a child is doomed simply because his or her parent is unfit. But through this seemingly simple form of the fairy tale, these stories explain to both child and parent audiences that a child can experience positive growth and take positive lessons from bad parenting. The ideas presented in this thesis could certainly be expanded to show even further social ramifications because of these tales. A study could even be done on children who face parenting like those in fairy tales to see how they turn out and how they bridge the gap to adulthood. The literary could be expanded further by using even more of the many fairy tale stories that fit in well with my theories, but for now these four examples do a sufficient job of proving that disappointing fairy tale parents do, in fact, create better children.

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