

## Gender Stereotypes in Children's Literature (with special reference to H.Ch. Andersen's and W. Disney's fairytales)

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### **Abstract**

This article is devoted to the study of those concepts of masculinity and femininity that are fixed and replicated in children's literature. These gender stereotypes are absorbed during early childhood, when the process of gender identification takes place. We view gender identity as the process through which children acquire the characteristics, attitudes, values and behaviors that society defines as appropriate to their gender and which lead them to adopt roles and responsibilities that are prescribed to men and women. A number of stories by H.Ch. Andersen and W. Disney have been analyzed in order to determine how gender roles and sex frequency appear in children's literature. It should also be noted that no theoretical reasoning and generalizations are valid unless they are corroborated and tested empirically. That is why the use of quantitative and qualitative methods of sociology in the study of gender relations is more than obvious.

**Key words:** *gender roles, gender stereotypes, fairytales, male, female, children's literature.*

### **Introduction**

Fairytales have an influence on the socialization of children and shape social expectations and gender roles. Fairytales being one of the most enduring childhood impressions play an important role in the construction and perception of self. Children's literature has a significant impact on children's perceptions of appropriate behavior in the society as it teaches children

behavior patterns and value systems. Children's literature is oriented toward eternal, unshakable humanistic values, teaches to distinguish between good and evil, lies and truth. In this respect, the role of literature is primarily due to the fact that the basic ideas and meanings expressed in the language of artistic forms and images can penetrate into consciousness, thus exerting a strong influence on the individual. On the one hand, literary works educate their readers/listeners with certain aspirations, on the other hand, they satisfy their real needs.

Fairytales show various aspects of life through fictitious characters. It not only develops children's imagination, but also gives them an opportunity to take part in the described events and understand some aspects of reality.

There are gender stereotypes that children always come across in fairytales. In fairytales males are often described as brave, strong and competent, whereas females are described as incompetent and passive. Females are expected to be assertive, compliant and nurturing. In children's literature the following words are associated with femininity: *soft, sensitive, quiet, emotional, dependent, passive, flirtatious, graceful, innocent, submissive, weak, nurturing, self-critical, and sexually*. The words associated with masculinity are the following: *competitive, independent, non-emotional, rebellious, experienced, strong, self-confident, aggressive (sexually), and active* (Knyazyan 2015). Fairytales teach young girls how to transform themselves into proper women according to prevailing standards in the society. They are taught to be *self-sacrificing, sweet, passive*, whereas boys are encouraged to be *strong and adventurous*. The images of women (*the damsel, the princess, the temptress, the evil witch*) in fairytales have a powerful influence on children's perceptions of gender roles and stereotypes. The nineteenth-century children's literature was intended to show the girls how to become attractive and domesticated (Baker-Sperry 2003).

English fairy tales, like the tales of other peoples, affect all aspects of the life of the ethnos. They reflect the notions of good and evil, life and death, earth and sky, happiness and sorrow, beautiful and ugly, people and animals and, of course, the idea of a woman and a man.

### Gender in H.Ch. Andersen's Fairytales

The majority of H.Ch. Andersen's fairytales encourage a male gender bias. Males are represented nearly twice as frequently as females as children's literature usually views females as dependent and passive (Fox 1993). The roles of male characters are usually adventurous and exciting, whereas the roles of female characters are limited to that of caretakers or females who are in need of help from a male (Temple 1993).

The following fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen have been studied: *The Little Mermaid, The Angel, The Butterfly, Clod Hans, The Cock and the Weathercock, The Days of the Week, A Drop of Water, The Flying Trunk, The Girl Who Stepped on Bread, The Great Sea Serpent, It is Perfectly True, The Pine Tree, The Pixy and the Grocer, The Princess and the Pea, The Shadow, The Silver Shilling, The Storks, The Swans' Nest, The Sweethearts, The Teapot, The Tinderbox.*

In Andersen's fairytales there are thirty-nine females and forty-eight males who are represented as characters. There are also thirty-two neutral characters. Male dominance was clearly prominent in all Andersen's fairytales. Thus, of the twenty works by Andersen, fourteen stories included characters with occupations. Males had eighteen occupations while females had eight. Female occupations were passive, they *included five princesses, three queens, a fortuneteller, two witches and a beggar, a maid, a nurse and a servant.* Male occupations were active, they included *three kings, three scholars, a squire, a tourist, a traveler, a merchant, a grocer, a student, a trumpeter, a soldier, a servant, a chairman, a messenger, a defender, and a shoemaker.*

In Andersen's fairytales the males displayed more emotions than the females. This was too unexpected since females were typically stereotyped as more emotional. The female characters displayed the following emotions: *loneliness, pride, sorrow, hurt, hatred and arrogance.* The emotions expressed by male characters included *anger, contentment, vengeance, fear, sadness and misery.*

Andersen's fairytales place much value on the physical beauty. To be physically attractive was important both for males and for females. The

stereotype of feminine beauty in these fairytales essentially affects the formation of gender identity. In fairytales physical beauty, innocence, grace are rewarded, while powerful, aggressive, and ugly characters are punished. For example, the feminine beauty stereotype, was mentioned in *The Teapot*. In *The Girl Who Stepped on Bread*, Inger was described as pretty. Had it not been for her beauty, she would have been treated more badly due to her arrogance and pride. The association of beauty with “good” and ugly with “bad” influences greatly children’s perception of physical attractiveness.

*The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Andersen is precise to be scrutinized in the terms of symbols of gender stereotypes. The symbols of gender stereotypes revealed in *The Little Mermaid* are divided into two groups; symbols of masculinity and femininity. We have found three symbols related to masculinity: **king**, **knife** and **sword** and three symbols related to femininity: **the mermaid/siren**, **long hair** and **oyster**.

**King** is considered as a symbol of masculinity and has the meaning of a *strong man*. In the story the **king** is represented as a patriarchy figure.

In *The Little Mermaid* the word **knife** is repeated seven times and is highly related to the issue of masculinity. At the end of the story, the little mermaid did not win the young prince’s immortal soul because she had to kill him by using the **knife** given by the witch. But, she decided to throw away the **knife** into the sea. Soon afterwards she died. In *The Little Mermaid* the presence of a **knife** is related to *death, sacrifice, and strength*.

E.g.: ... *She danced again quite readily, to please him, though each time her foot touched the floor it seemed as if she trod on sharp knives.*”  
(p. 18)

From the illustration, it can be seen that how hard the little mermaid must hold up the pain made by the **knife** in order to get the immortal soul of the prince.

“**Sword**” is a symbol of masculinity and has the meaning of a brave, adventurous and intellectual man. In children’s literature the symbol of a “**sword**” frequently becomes the part of literary works. The king, the army and

the prince in children's literature always have a sword which is used to show the prowess in battle. The presence of a **sword** always deals with *authority, justice and courage* in fairytales.

For example:

*"I will prepare a draught for you, with which you must swim to land tomorrow*

*before sunrise, and sit down on the shore and drink it. Your tail will then disappear, and shrink up into what mankind calls legs, and you will feel great pain, as if a **sword** were passing through you....., If you will bear all this, I will help you" "Yes, I will," said the little princess in a trembling voice, as thought of the prince and the immortal soul."* (p. 28)

*"Then the little mermaid drank the magic draught, and it seemed as if a two-edged*

***sword** went through her delicate body: she fell into a swoon, and lay like one dead."* (p. 26)

The "**Mermaid/Siren**" is the symbol of femininity and has the meaning of a flirtatious woman.

In the *Little Mermaid* "**long hair**" is considered as a femininity symbol and has the meaning of a *loyal and submissive woman*.

Eg.: *"...., and that she had as pretty pair of white legs and tiny feet as any little maiden could have.... "* (p. 22)

*"Very soon it was said that the prince must marry, and that the beautiful daughter of a neighboring king would be his wife, for a fine ship was being fitted out....., "I must travel," he had said to her; "I must see this beautiful princess; my parents desire it; but they will not oblige me to bring her home as my bride. I cannot love her; she is not like the beautiful maiden in the temple, whom you*

*resemble. If I were forced to choose a bride, I would rather choose you my dumb founding, with those expressive eyes.” And then he kissed her rosy mouth, played with her long waving hair, and laid his head on her heart, while she dreamed of human happiness and immortal soul.”* (p. 20)

It is interesting to note that in some fairytales such as *Rhapunzel*, *Aladdin*, the main girl characters have **“long hair”**.

**Oyster** is the symbol of femininity and has the most possible meaning of a nurturing woman. The **oyster** in *The Little Mermaid* is an animal that has an important role or position of a high rank mermaid in the sea world.

Eg.: *“At last she reached her fifteenth year. “Well, now, you are grown up,” said the old dowager, her grandmother, . . . , then the old lady ordered eight great oysters to attach themselves to the tail of the princess to show her high rank. “But they hurt me so”, said the little mermaid. “Pride must suffer pain” replied the old lady.”* (p. 25)

The presence of an **oyster** is always related to the figure of a grandmother who always nurtures and gives guidance to her granddaughters.

### **Male and Female Stereotypes in Walt Disney’s Fairytales**

W. Disney’s fairytales show males and females in stereotypical roles. They have a sexist influence on children and fall in line with the sexual biases that exist in society.

In Disney’s fairytales five themes are related to males: 1. males use physical strength to express their emotions; 2. males are unable to control their sexuality; 3. males are strong and heroic; 4. males always have non-domestic jobs; 5. fat males have always negative characteristics.

Males use physical strength to express their emotions. In twelve of the twenty-six fairytales (*Mulan, Bambi, Mermaid, Lady, Cinderella, Peter, Sleeping, Oliver, Hercules, and Beauty*), males responded to an emotional situation with aggressive behavior. Six fairytales displayed the examples of male heroes using both physical and verbal means of expression. In *Tarzan and Emperor* males used more physical than verbal expression, whereas in *Aladdin, Jungle, Pinocchio, and Hunchback* male heroes used more verbal than physical expression. But in six fairytales (*Dumbo, Aristocrats, Bambi, Jungle, Oliver, and Mulan*) male heroes do not express emotions and suppress them. In fifteen fairytales (*Hercules, Pinocchio, Dalmatians, Hunchback, Oliver, Bambi, Cinderella, Fox, Alice, Lady, Jungle, Mermaid, Beauty, Aladdin, and Mulan*), male heroes lose their senses in the presence of an attractive woman. In nineteen fairytales (*Pooh, Pinocchio, Bambi, Oliver, Cinderella, Peter, Sleeping, Mermaid, Tarzan, Mulan, Dalmatians, Jungle, Aristocrats, Robin, Beauty, Aladdin, Lion, Hunchback, and Pocahontas*), male heroes are shown as rescuers. In seventeen of the fairytales, male characters have non-domestic jobs, but only in three fairytales (*Tarzan, Pinocchio, and Jungle*) they performed domestic tasks. In nine fairytales (*Hunchback, Pooh, Cinderella, Alice, Dalmatians, Aladdin, Lion, Peter, and Mulan*), fat male characters were portrayed negatively as unintelligent, slow, sloppy.

In Disney's fairy tales there are four themes that are related to female characters: 1. female's beauty, appearance is valued more than her intellect; 2. females are always weak, helpless, and need protection; 3. females are domestic and likely to marry; 4. fat females are ugly, unpleasant, and unmarried.

In fifteen fairytales (*Oliver, Dwarfs, Hunchback, Pinocchio, Hercules, Aristocrats, Cinderella, Alice, Peter, Lady, Sleeping, Dalmatians, Jungle, Robin, and Emperor*), a female's value was determined by her beauty more than by her intellect. In *Mulan, Mermaid, Beauty, Aladdin, Pocahontas, and Tarzan* females were valued both by their appearance and by their intellect. In *Mermaid, Beauty, Aladdin, and Mulan* female characters were valued for appearance more than for intellect. The examples of female's need of

protection occurred in eleven fairytales (*Dwarfs, Bambi, Cinderella, Peter, Lady, Sleeping, Robin, Oliver, Mermaid, Lion, and Hercules*). In *Alice, Dalmatians, Aristocrats, Beauty, Aladdin, Hunchback, and Tarzan* women were more likely to need help and protection from men than to be independent and adventurous. In *Fox, Pocahontas, and Mulan*, there were portrayals of both females needing protection as well as heroic women, but with more portrayals of adventurous and independent women. In *Hunchback, Dwarfs, Cinderella, Peter, Lady, Sleeping, Jungle, Lion, Aristocrats, Robin, Fox, Mermaid, Beauty, Hercules, and Emperor*, women were portrayed in domestic roles. In *Tarzan and Pocahontas* marriage was not an ultimate goal for women. In *Cinderella, Alice, Robin, and Mermaid* fat women were portrayed in a negative light.

### Conclusion

Stereotypes associated with the gender factor reflect the views of society on the behavior expected of men or women. Stereotype ideas about the image of a man and a woman, which are still spread to all members of a particular gender, regardless of their individual characteristics and age, have evolved over the centuries. The patriarchal paradigm that structures the fairytale genre naturalizes the subordination of women in a male dominated society. Thus, fairytales are always created and reproduced through an androcentric lens.

The moral of most fairytales is that the heroines who obey conventional female virtues and submit to the structures of patriarchy will live happily. Consequentially, she receives both the prince and guarantee of social and financial security through marriage (Rowe 1999). The social and economic dependence of fairytale princesses on males has had a powerful influence in molding the concept of femininity. Women in fairytales who fall short of this “feminine” standard are cast as evil. Wicked women are cast as witches, sea urchins, stepmothers and stepsiblings, endure punishment and are stripped of their power and agency (Zipes 1983). They are portrayed as ugly, dark, and undesirable. Wealth and status are associated with passivity, beauty, and



helplessness, whereas self-aware, aggressive and powerful women are associated with punishment and death.

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### Գենդերային կարծրատիպերը մանկական գրականության մեջ

Մեծերի աշխարհին զուգահեռ կա մի փոքր իրականություն. դա մանուկների հեքիաթային աշխարհն է, որում գոյություն ունեն դերային դիքորոշումներ՝ պայմանավորված գենդերային փոխհարաբերություն-

ներով: Գենդերային դերեր ասելով հասկանում ենք հասարակության կողմից տղամարդկանց և կանանց թելադրվող վարքի տիպեր (վարքագիծ, արտաքին տեսք, խոսք, շարժումն և այլն):

Մանկական գրականությունը կարելի է բնորոշել որպես տղամարդկանց և կանանց դերի և կարգավիճակի մասին գաղափարների և հայացքների, հասկացությունների և պատկերացումների համակարգ: