Applying the Feminist Theory to *Cinderella*

“Others have also expressed concern about the collective weak, silent, and passive females who populate the stories of the Western European canon, females whose chief virtues lie in their physical beauty, their silence, their docility, and their dependence on a stronger male figure to rescue them from a predicament from which they cannot extricate themselves.” - “‘Cinderella was a Wuss’: A Young Girl’s Responses to Feminist and Patriarchal Folktales” by Ann M. Trousdale and Sally McMillan.

The article this quotation was derived from views children’s folktales through a feminist literary lens. It explains the growing concern of how women are portrayed in the stories we tell children, and the implicit messages sent to children through these stories, especially young girls. A common element in all varieties of feminist theories is the oppression of women by the reign of patriarchy in contemporary society. When studied through a feminist literary lens, the 1950 Walt Disney film of *Cinderella* is content-rich. Its portrayal of women’s dependence on men, their submissive nature, the importance they place on physical beauty and their relationship with animals makes the film a convenient example to analyze.

The main character, though female, relies on men to drive her life and the story forward. The common belief of those in the setting of the story is that a woman is nothing without her husband. *Cinderella* is centered on finding a man to marry. The stereotype that women are weak, dependent, and emotional is exemplified in the film. After the death of her father, the only prominent male figure in her life, Cinderella is subjected to degrading tasks and hours of household work. Throughout the film Cinderella is unable to overcome the obstacles she faces and resigns herself to spending her days doing chores and cleaning up after her mother and stepsisters, who are living solely off of the income generated by Cinderella’s father before he passed. Cinderella waits for something to happen to her and is unable to overcome her bad situation independently. It is only when she obtains knowledge of the ball that she begins to be motivated to change her situation.

*Cinderella* glorifies obedience and submissiveness in women. Through the quiet, obedient character of Cinderella, the message that is being sent out to children is that women need a man to save them, fitting the “damsel in distress” archetype. The men are respected for their attributes such as bravery, honor, and status, while the women are valued only for the passivity and beauty, showing the inequalities between the sexes in the film. Just as much as the character of Cinderella exemplifies all that women should seemingly aspire to be, Cinderella’s evil stepmother and stepsisters provide an example of how women should not act. Their demanding, authoritative, selfish, and lazy character defies the role of women in a patriarchal society. The stepsisters do not get married at the end of the movie, communicating the idea that obedient, submissive behavior should be rewarded in women and young girls, and authoritative, unkind behavior should be punished.

Another underlying message in *Cinderella* is that physical beauty is the primary characteristic that women should be concerned with. Even after Cinderella decides to try and change her circumstance, the fairy godmother’s help is purely aesthetical and has nothing to do with Cinderella’s personality or character. She gives Cinderella a pretty dress and shoes for the purpose of impressing the prince with her outward beauty, perpetuating the notion that the only desirable trait in a woman is her appearance. Prince Charming knows nothing about Cinderella’s character or personality, and only “falls in love” with her physical appearance. In the film, Cinderella is presented as a perfect representation of what western society would deem beautiful. Her blonde hair, thin body, delicate features and fair skin send the message to young viewers that this is what they should look like in order for men to find them attractive.

Similar to the caretaking role of a wife, sister, or mother, Cinderella’s attachment to the animals who she befriends demonstrates the kind and nurturing character that women are meant to have. This is shown by her actions of clothing and feeding the animals, and ultimately sends the message to children that women have familial and household duties which are solely their responsibility.

Trousdale and Macmillan discuss the portrayal of females as “weak, silent, and passive” in Western European literature. Disney’s *Cinderella* is the perfect example of the texts that provoked the formation of the feminist literary theory. Its glorification of passivity in females sends the wrong message to its contemporary target audience of young girls. The character of Cinderella must be analyzed with knowledge of the current role of women in contemporary society.

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