

Fairy Tales and Gender Roles

Grade 2 and 3

Fairy Tales are a wonderful genre to explore how gender has been portrayed historically and in current times. Traditional fairy tales and fractured ones (modern day ones with a twist) allow primary students to think critically about how men and women are portrayed and compare these portrayals to their own families and communities.

Teaching Strategies and Questions:

A familiar starting point for students is to read common fairy tales and identify the elements that make it different from a non-fiction story. Once you have identified the elements of a fairy tale, you can begin to ask students what they notice about how the princesses and princes are being portrayed in the story. You might ask some open-ended questions like the following:

- 1) How are princesses usually portrayed at the start of a story? (i.e. Cinderella, Rapunzel)
- 2) Is she waiting around for something or someone to come to her rescue or make her happy? If so, whom?
- 3) Towards the end of a story what makes Cinderella and Snow White happy? Why do you think that might be?



After reading a variety of traditional and fractured fairy tales and analyzing the components of each style of fairy tale ask students:

- 4) In your world (i.e. modern times), who is a more realistic character? (Princess Smartypants or Rapunzel) Why do you think that? Who does each princess remind you of in real life?
- 5) Can a prince or princess be single and live happily ever after? Why or why not? Do you know anyone who is single and happy?

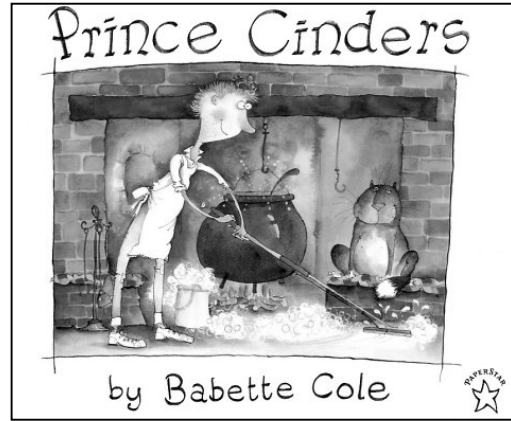
You might hold a secret ballot on a particular question to have students record their thoughts without being influenced by peer pressure or gender bias. You can then discuss the results of the ballot and why someone might believe that one fairy tale character may be more representative of girls in today's times. Here are some stories you might want to compare and contrast with students.

Traditional Fairy Tales (Gendered)	Fractured Fairy Tales (Role Reversal)
Cinderella	Prince Cinders
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs	Snow White in New York
The Ugly Ducking	The Sissy Duckling
Rapunzel	Princess Smarty Pants
The Princess and the Pea	The Paper Bag Princess

Possible Extensions:

If you have already done some direct teaching about sexism with students and they have familiarity with the term and its meaning, you might read stories together and use any of the following strategies with students:

- 1) Pick a traditional fairy tale and read it aloud. Ask students to stop you when they see or hear a sexist incident in the story. Students call out "Stop!" when they want you to cease reading. They must then identify the sexist incident before you can proceed with the story.
- 2) Have students take a traditional fairy tale and work together in small groups to write a new ending for it. Ask them to create one where the princess and prince live in a more realistic, independent manner.
- 3) Use the Social Responsibility Performance Standards (SRPS for Kindergarten to Grade 3) and ask students to work in small groups to analyze a character's behaviour within the story. Use the "defending human rights" strand of the SRPS. Ask groups of students to rate a specific character in terms of how they treat the female characters in the story. Does the character meet expectations of the SRPS? Why or why not? Have students orally report out their observations to the class.
- 4) Use the book, *King and King*, to prompt student thinking about marriage equality. Ask students if two princes or princesses can get married or not. Read the story and then debrief student reactions to the book. Ask students: What did you notice in this fairy tale that was unexpected? How did you react to the part of the story where the two princes got married? Why? What messages have you heard about who can or cannot marry?
- 5) Ask students to write their own fractured/non-traditional fairy tale where the prince or princess is portrayed in a non gender specific role. Tell them you are looking for non-sexist behaviour in at least one character.



Assessment:

- 1) Can students define sexism in their own words?
- 2) Can students describe some simple negative effects of sexism? (Social Responsibility IRP p. 22)
- 3) Are students able to identify one way in which sexism is portrayed in traditional fairy tales?