Contamination of Childhood Fairy Tale: Pre-Service Teachers Explore Gender and Race Constructions

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This study explores the possibilities of challenging European-American middle-class social codes perpetuated by fairy tales through creative writing and artmaking. For centuries, writers and artists have continued to create new versions of old tales. Critiquing through recreation of fairy tales can reveal biases of personal and cultural constructions of race and gender. Like authors and illustrators of children's books, 25 pre-service teachers were invited to "contaminate" fairy tales from their childhood, through which to become aware of metaphors they live by and explore where and how pre-existing codes entered their lives. Their retellings of traditional tales and accompanying illustrations show their awareness, as well as unawareness, of gender and racial stereotypes in children's fairy tales. Students were comfortable reconstructing the traditional gender roles, but hesitated to challenge the racial identities in their creations. The students and I gained insight about the possibilities of children recreating fairy tales in future classrooms.

As a child, the best part of the year was when Disney released a new animated film in the theaters. I imagined I was every one of Disney's princess or female characters: Ariel, Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty. I never thought of these characters as weak, helpless, or dependent on men. I saw them as beautiful and radiant.

Being raised by all the movies didn't harmfully affect me. I watched the same movies when I was their age, and I don't feel I have a warped view of gender or race.

I grew up on these movies; they are movies! The adults look
into the movies too much, and do not realize that children watch these movies for entertainment and pleasure. They are not picking up on what the adults feel are prejudices.

These are reactions of the pre-service teachers in my children’s literature classroom after watching *Mickey Mouse Monopoly* (Sun & Picker, 2001), a videotape about racism and sexism in Disney animation films, and were typical reactions for all eight classes of college students I taught. Interestingly enough, in a lesson about fairy tales, I had my students as small groups draw “Snow White” in their minds, and all six groups in one classroom drew a very similar image—a princess with a red hair band, blue and yellow gown, and a red cloak. With no reference to Disney’s Snow White in display, these college students vividly recalled her image from memory. Is it true, as many of my students said, that Disney retellings of fairy tales, or other texts for children, have no impact on children’s view of gender and race?

Entertainment and pleasure, as Giroux (1999) stresses, can never be only taken at face value and there is always public pedagogy involved. Zipes (1995a) points out:

If we look at the Walt Disney industry and the vast distribution of bowdlerized and sanitized versions of fairy tales by Perrault, the Grimms, Bechstein, Collodi, and other classical authors, it is apparent that they have been incorporated into the Western culture industry mainly to amuse children and adults alike. Yet amusement is not to be taken lightly, for distraction and divertissement have an important ideological function: Almost all the classical fairy tales that have achieved prominence and are to be enjoyed in the United States can be considered as products that reinforce an ideological and middle-class social code. (p. 2)
Stories are never neutral. Authors' ideologies and worldviews, including their views of what it means to be children, and more specific, what it means to be boys or girls, are embedded in their narratives for children. Davies (2003) found that children as young as four or five years old already have pre-existing knowledge and anticipation of how princes and princesses should look and act in fairy tales.

The goals of this study are twofold: First, to review what kinds of social codes are embedded in fairy tales for children and to examine how these codes are perpetuated or changed through time. Second, to explore the possibilities of how re-writing and re-creating a familiar tale from childhood offer pre-service teachers a critical space to reflect and negotiate their own experiences of being girls and boys and their assumptions of children and childhood.

Social Codes in Traditional Fairy Tales

In the beginning, folktales and fairy tales were not created with a child audience in mind. In the Middle Ages, oral tales accompanied adult audiences during the time of repetitive household chores or harvesting tasks to shorten the hours, and these tales were "fast-paced adventure stories filled with bawdy episodes, violent scenes, and scatological humor" (Tatar, 1992, p. 37). Perrault in late 17th century France and Brothers Grimm in early 19th century Germany were among the first who systematically collected and put the oral tales into words. The realization by the Brothers Grimm that the tales they collected (the original intended audience were scholars and linguists) were to be shared with children influenced the editing and selection of tales for their second edition of Nursery and Household Tales (Zipes, 1988). They wanted to produce a collection appropriate for children as well as attractive to parents. The traditional tales have therefore been altered, sanitized, or re-interpreted to meet the general and personal standards of what were appropriate for children
and reinforced the preconceived notion of gender and class roles according to the patriarchal codes of their time (Zipes, 1988).

Fairy tales in the patriarchal tradition, in general, portray women as weak, submissive, dependent, and self-sacrificing, while men are powerful, active, and dominant. Stone (1975, cited in Zipes, 1986) compares the original Grimms' fairy tales with the British and U.S. translations of the past two centuries as well as with the Disney versions of the 20th century. The results of her study reveal that the products of the modern culture industry specify that a woman can only be considered a heroine if she is patient, industrious, calm, beautiful, and passive. Disney studio continued to reproduce and duplicate the traditional fairy tales revised by early male collectors such as Perrault and the Grimms without questioning their ideology. One shared aspect, for instance, is the domestication of women: Disney went further than the Grimms to make Snow White care and clean by nature and make the household jobs seem effortless and fun (Tatar, 1999).

Because fairy tales are specific to the historical and cultural context and are products of the dominant discourse, people growing up in these contexts tend to accept the gendered storylines and representations of children as natural and essential, especially when the plots and characters reaffirm their ideologies. Canonized patriarchal fairy tales contribute to such repetition and layering and reinforce the notion that polarized gender roles are only natural and logical. If pre-service teachers leave the classroom with their ideology of gender unchallenged, it is highly possible that they will perpetuate these binary gender roles in their future classrooms. It is therefore important to be aware of and critically look at the cultural assumptions and unexamined messages in texts. Trousdale and McMillan (2003) suggest that through comparing and juxtaposing multiple texts and conflicting storylines students are offered the possibility of seeing culturally dominant scripts from new perspectives. Through critical
Possibilities: Contaminating the Old Tales

Disney's case of protection and lawsuit of their fairy tale animation films demonstrates that "the question of ownership...is a question of control" (Haase, 1993/1999, p. 361). Haase suggests that fairy tales truly belong to every one of us. It is through the claiming of fairy tales for ourselves "in every individual act of telling and reading" that we can "avoid reading fairy tales as models of behavior and normalcy" (p. 361). By creating and re-creating our own versions, we, both children and adults, can "re-appropriate the tales" and assert our "own proprietary rights to meaning" (p. 363).

Zipes (2001) also argues that "contamination" of fairy tales can be a powerful source of knowledge. The term "contamination" has traditionally had a negative connotation: folklorists use it to "point to foreign elements that may have been added to or have seeped into what appears to be pure, homogenous narrative tradition" (p. 102). In this sense, the Grimms could be described as the greatest contaminators of fairy tales. But Zipes opens up a positive aspect of the contamination of tales: "Contamination can be an enrichment process; it can lead to the birth of something unique and genuine in its own right" (p. 102). Likewise, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) stress that "new metaphors are capable of creating new understanding and, therefore, new realities" (p. 235). The recurring motifs in traditional fairy tales become metaphors of one's life and the construction of stereotypes. Immediately one recognizes the roles of the evil stepmother, the beautiful princes, the wise woman, and the fairy godmother. Yet, revision of fairy tales holds a sense of agency: revisionists create retellings, which provide readers new possibilities to be aware of and read against stereotypes in the traditional pre-
Authors and artists of fairy tale retellings “contaminate” the old tales and create new meanings and metaphors, both literally and visually, through which new ways of structuring our experience and new conceptual metaphors are created (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Anne Sexton’s (1972) poetic version of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” offers a new way of reading the well-known fairy tale. The poem ends with Snow White looking into the mirror just as the stepmother did, suggesting the story goes into a circle:

Meanwhile Snow White held court,
rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
and sometimes referring to her mirror
as women do. (p. 9)

Paul (1998) resonates this idea by talking about Gilbert and Gubar’s (1979, cited in Paul, 1998) discussion about how the story of Snow White can be read as a beauty myth: “the story of the aging of a single woman, represented as a mother/daughter split … the story pivots on beauty, its fundamental importance for young women, and how the loss of it turns old women into [evil] witches” (p. 37).

There is also a visionary quality to metaphors. Carrie Mae Weems’s photo art, *Mirror, Mirror* (1987), is a powerful example of interrupting cultural definition between race and beauty. In the artwork, a Black woman is holding a mirror and a White fairy godmother figure is looking out from the mirror. The inscription under the photo says ‘LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR, THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED, “MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL, WHO’S THE FINEST OF THEM ALL?” THE MIRROR SAYS, “SNOW WHITE, YOU BLACK BITCH, AND DON’T YOU FORGET IT!!!”’ Chicago and Lucie-Smith (1999) talked about Weems’ piece:

Carrie Mae Weems combines gender and race in *Mirror, Mirror*, in which the forthright inscription carries at least
as much weight as the actual image ... The piece is a reminder of the way in which our attitudes are formed at an early age by things like folk tales and fairy tales, and the illustrations that accompany them. This is especially the case when a fairy tale is transformed, translated, and rendered almost universally available by modern mass culture ... Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), offered an image of youthful female beauty and desirability which must have affected generations of Black children, who found themselves classified by implication as permanently inferior. "Whiteness" and "goodness" are insistently related in the movie. (p. 153)

Both the artwork and the critique share the belief that our attitudes toward gender and race are formed early in life. Narrative and artwork, along with critiques, enable readers to read the old tales critically and form multiple perspectives. This brings new possibilities into teaching reading, writing, and art-creation: Readers of fairy tales can also actively take up the roles of cultural creators.

**Fairy Tale Recreation Project**

Twenty-five students, six males and 19 females, enrolled in my summer children's literature course participated in a fairy tale recreation project. The purpose of the project was to reconstruct a traditional fairy tale from childhood by reworking, replacing, or adding to the illustrations and texts in order to reform the cultural values and identities in the fairy tale based on their experiences and beliefs about gender roles, race, and sexual orientation. Most students were junior and senior elementary education majors; others were returning with a bachelor's degree and seeking teaching certification or a master's degree. Three of them were married and had children. All were White and of European ancestry.

The summer course contained 12 sessions, three hours each. As
a class, we first generated on the blackboard a list of fairy tale titles that the students remembered. Each student then drew a fairy tale character they visualized in their mind on a piece of paper. The fairy tale characters and scenes that the students chose to draw came from memory of diverse stories, both traditional and literary fairy tales, including *Cinderella*, *The Three Little Pigs*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Rapunzel*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Frog Prince*, *Little Mermaid*, *The Princess and the Pea*, and *The Sword and the Stone*. Not all of these stories have Disney versions, but it is not difficult to find Disney influences in the drawings of this group. The most obvious case is the candlestick from Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (see Figure 1). Two of the three Little Mermaid pieces have a red hair mermaid in it, whereas in Anderson's version her hair color is never revealed. This first assignment let students reflect back on their childhood fairy tale encounters and establish a starting point for the possible topic for their final project.

In the sessions that followed, we talked about common elements in fairy tales, and looked closely at different versions of *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Snow White*. At this stage, students started to think about which fairy tale they would like to rewrite and who they might like to work with. They were encouraged to form a group of two or three to generate discussion, but were also given the freedom to work...
individually.

Students spent half of a class session to discuss with partners their initial ideas for the project. They were then required to read at least five versions of the same tale they chose to rework and were encouraged to constantly revisit and make connections to their project as the class continued to discuss different topics, such as multicultural children's literature and children's popular culture. On the last day of the class, students presented their final work to the class and turned in a two-page reflection paper on their creative process.

Patterns of Gender and Race Constructions

Some of the final works are powerful parodies both visually and literally (e.g., *The Cindy Ella Story*). Others, however, fail to rewrite the story in a more critical way by merely changing the traditional tale into modern settings (e.g., *Rapunzel in L.A.*). There are individual differences as well as general patterns across these twelve projects. These patterns include gender reconstruction, problematic representation of race, and popular cultural influences.

Gender Reconstruction

All groups except one chose to rewrite fairy tales with a female protagonist. *Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty* were the most popular choices for revision. The only exception was *Jamie and the Alien*, a rewriting of *Jack and the Beanstalk*, where the gender of the main character was not revealed. This group intentionally chose a gender-neutral name, Jamie, for the main character and avoided the use of he or she to refer to the character throughout the story. The purpose was to show, as they wrote in their reflection paper, that girls can have adventures too, and it is up to the reader to determine if Jamie is a boy or a girl. They also used a picture that could be either a boy or a girl for their cover illustration (see Figure 2). The
domination of female protagonists among students' retellings might be due to the high percentage of female students in the class. However, even groups containing male students chose tales with female protagonists, too. It is highly possible that when referring to fairy tales, the most popular and typical stories coming to students’ minds were those that have been made into Disney films. Most of the retellings portray a strong and independent female character. Rather than being passive and helpless as in the traditional tales, these female characters are resourceful and pursue their own destiny. In The Sleeping Star and Rumpelstiltskin, the female protagonists do not choose to marry the saviors of their lives but decide to live happily with their family and friends. In The Princess and P.E., the princess runs away from the arranged marriage by her royal parents and pursues a college degree in New York City. She eventually meets the lover of her life, who happens to be a rapper, and brings him back to her kingdom. Snow White is a powerful retelling: with no romance going on in the plot, the story is about how the kind and courageous princess regains the kingdom from her evil stepfather, and forms a strong sisterhood with a lower social class girl. This story also challenges the binary gender roles by having Snow White love learning how to use a sword and a
shield, and by having the seven dwarfs love cooking, cleaning, and sewing (see Figure 3). These retellings break traditional romantic ideology by giving agency to the princess and reconsidering female roles.

Another significant aspect of gender in students' retellings is the villain. In Snow White, The Cindy Ella Story, Rumpelstiltskin, and Rapunzel in L.A., the evil stepmother and stepsisters have been reversed to father/stepfather and stepbrothers. On the other hand, in Jamie and the Alien, instead of a male giant, the group made the villain a female alien on Mars. Although students wrote in their reflections that they did so to challenge the gender stereotype, the gender reversion of the same character is still problematic. Crew (2002) and Parson (2004), for example, point out that a simple reversal of gender roles does not necessarily result in a feminist text. The subtle discursive formations encoded in patriarchal tales are also what need to be reworked. Feminist reworking of fairy tales often pays attention to the silenced voices in the story, the representation of power relations, the empowerment of both female and male, the new possibilities of gendered relationships, and the work of feminist thinking, such as subjectivity, agency, choice, autonomy, and the ethic of care into the retelling. In my future teaching, these issues need be stressed in discussion in a similar class project.
Problematic Representation of Race

All the female protagonists created by students are White or suggested by the illustration to be White, except the Cinder-Puppy story, which uses dogs as characters. Three groups, however, include minor characters of diverse ethnicity in their stories. Both Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: What Really Happened and Snow White Meets Cinderella use diverse racial representations for the seven dwarfs. The former uses names from different cultures, such as Pedro, Fantasia, Yi Wang, etc. The later uses images of multicultural groups copied from the Internet (see Figure 4). These visual representations are exaggerated cartoon figures that are rather stereotypical. The

Sleeping Star is the only story that uses an African American as leading character, the prince. In this modern version of Sleeping Beauty, the princess, Estelle, who is a famous star, is severely hurt while filming an exploration scene and falls into a lengthy coma. One day, while a Black nurse was doing his daily rounds and tending to Estelle’s needs, he attempts a revival technique that he learned during his schooling. To his surprise, although the procedure had been tried many times

Figure 4. The seven roommates in Snow White Meets Cinderella by a male student.
already, Estelle opens her eyes this time. The nurse explains everything to her and tries to kiss her, but Estelle says, “Exactly what are you doing?! ... I apparently have been in a coma for years and as soon as I awake, you try to kiss me; no thank you.” Here, the representation of the nurse is problematic: we see a nurse doing a procedure that is probably beyond his training or even violating his work ethics, and we see a Black man kissing a vulnerable White woman without her permission. All three representations of race are stereotypical and problematic. They are merely an inclusion of diversity and fit Sims’s (1982) definition of a “melting pot” story, which recognizes and celebrates the university of human experience, such as friendship, family relationship and everyday life, but “ignore all differences except physical ones: skin color and other racially related physical features” (p. 33). They ignore the uniqueness of culture specific experiences and avoid the discussion of racial problems. Again, these aspects of multicultural issues need to be stressed and discussed more in my future classroom.

**Popular Culture Influences**

Another pattern that emerged concerns the elements of the narrative texts that students chose to change. Nine groups chose to set the background of the story in modern time. Four of the twelve groups chose to have the main female character become a star or singer and perform successfully in Hollywood or Las Vegas (Snow White Meets Cinderella, Rumpelstiltskin, Rapunzel in L.A., and The Sleeping Star). This pattern might be a result of our reading of French’s (1986) picture book Snow White in New York in class. In French’s retelling Snow White becomes a famous singer in the 1920s-30s in New York City. However, this pattern also shows the students’ idea of what it means to be successful for a female in modern times. Rather than, say, being successful in academia or receiving a Nobel Prize, a “princess-dream-come-true” story today is to become famous
in the movie and music industries.

Students' retellings also reflect the subculture of this group. Elements of popular culture are interwoven in their stories; for example, in *The Cindy Ella Story* the rich but evil stepbrother's name, Sebastian, comes from the movie "Cruel Intentions" (Moritz & Kumble, 1999). Images of Simon Cowell of the television show *American Idol*, actor Pierce Brosnan, singer Elvis Presley, and characters from popular TV series *Friends* were also used as visual portraits of their characters (see Figure 5). Others include new technologies in popular culture such as computers, chat rooms, and cell phones in the new versions of fairy tales. Along the same lines, Mary Kay lady, high-profile modern designers within today's fashion industry, plastic surgery, and new forms of diets are also written into their plots. As one student from *The Cindy Ella Story* group wrote thoughtfully in her reflection paper, "Our fairy tale project mirrors how media driven and oriented we are. Almost every aspect can be rooted in some type of media from our generation" (personal communication, July 14, 2004).

**Discussions and Conclusions**

The touch of race, class, and sexual orientation is rather superficial in the students' retellings (in some cases, gender as well). Strong White female characters pursuing success and fulfilling their own
destiny is a major theme across the stories. In most cases, race and social class, however, are mentioned only as background information of the minor characters. These characters are rather flat and their voices are not heard in these retellings. The issue of authenticity and authorship might be the students’ major concern. As one student discusses in the reflection paper about his comfort level of portraying diverse characters: “I thought about changing Snow White’s ethnicity. However, I did not think I had the proper knowledge to write from the perspective of a character that had a different cultural background from my own” (personal communication, July 14, 2004). As a result, gender seems to be the only accessible cultural element students could personally relate to and comfortably reconstruct.

Although some students seemed to fail to rewrite the story through a critical pen, their reflection papers showed a heightened awareness and sensitivity of the cultural assumptions and values that go into the story as well as a self-understanding through this project. Rapunzel in L.A., for example, shares the same plot of the traditional Rapunzel tale, with the only change being the time and setting. Nevertheless, students in this group acknowledged the ideology behind the story they created. Although this group did not create a story to interrupt traditional ideology, they were conscious that their story shares mainstream White, middle-class assumptions and makes this population probably the major consumer of children’s books.

Students’ works and reflections show different degrees of awareness, from creating a “politically correct” tale to interrupting the romance ideology. The Cindy Ella Story is a powerful realistic story that has a Cinderella theme. Set in a contemporary era in New Jersey, the female protagonist is abused by her stepfather and stepbrothers and dreams to one day leave the family and go to New York City to become a star. Instead of repeating the romantic scene, the group said they did not want to sugar coat life. They wanted to show that “dreams can be shattered and life may not always turn out
to be the happily ever after ending that you expect it to be”. One student thoughtfully wrote:

Having Cindy become a prostitute is a portrayal of what happens to many girls who go to the big city looking for love or to become a star...Cindy was able to get away from her evil stepfather and stepbrothers, but all the pain they caused her has made her resort to a profession in which men abuse her. In a way, this story changed from being a funny modern version of Cinderella, to an example of male abuse, and how it can seriously affect a young woman’s life decisions. (personal communication, July 14, 2004)

Some students started to talk about the possibilities of applying this project in their future classroom and how they realize the importance of teaching children to be aware of the dominant discourse in popular culture. By fostering critical awareness of social codes in cultural text, I hope students will in turn take this sensitivity into their future teaching careers. Researchers have reported using artmaking and creative writing to help elementary school children think critically about the dominant cultural texts. Tavin and Anderson (2003) outline a unit of study in a fifth grade classroom where students addressed issues of race and gender stereotyping, historical inaccuracies, and violence in Disney films. The fifth graders engaged in the critical interpretation of Disney characters and produced artworks based on those interpretations. Zipes (1995b, 2004) also documented his successful use of fairy tales and folktales in creative storytelling and drama with middle school and elementary school children. Children read and listen to various versions of stories from oral traditions around the world, rewrite and illustrate their own versions, and finally act out the stories they create. Sipe (2001) researched first- and second-grade students’ responses to five Rapunzel variants during storybook readalouds, and found that with each text being read to them the children’s understanding and
interests to the fairy tale progress along a path: from understanding and expecting a basic storyline to finally showing their readiness for becoming authors of their own variants. Although the first and second graders may not be able to create fairy tales as sophisticated and reflective as most college students did, they are ready to actively engage in taking the ownership of the tales into their hands.

One student concluded her reflection paper by saying, “I guess the most important thing to learn is just to try and be as sensitive as you can to race, gender, religion, and even sexual preference” (personal communication, July 14, 2004). By having the students contaminate a fairy tale from their childhood, this project successfully heightened the students’ awareness of race and gender stereotypes in children’s fairy tales and opened up the possibilities of exploring these issues with children in future classrooms.

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