Christina Meikle

Professor Charla Strosser

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<center>Changing Cultural Values as Revealed by Fairy Tale Curses</center>

Curses play a crucial and fascinating role in fairy tales. They move the plot along by providing a conflict for the protagonist to overcome. They provide motivation for the characters to act and to fight against opposition. Furthermore, there are aspects of the human personality that cannot be seen until one is presented with a difficult obstacle. Were the prince in Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast* never cursed, for example, what could a reader learn about Beauty by her choice to wed him? It is by her willingness to overlook his ugliness that her kindness is revealed. The presence of the curse in this story allows the modern reader to learn that kindness was a highly-valued quality in the time of Beaumont. Thus curses reveal many of the most dominant social values in older fairy tales. For example, anyone who reads many of them will notice the protagonists' ever-present struggle to find a mate and wed. This shows the importance of marriage in yesterday's society. A reading of a modern fairy tale, like Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted,* reveals a dramatic shift in the societal view of marriage. Through an analysis of curses in old and new fairy tales, one can see the changing cultural values of yesterday and today.

In comparing these older and modern fairy tales, one must first know what elements to focus in on. An examination of Propp's list of 31 functions provides at least four elements that

must be examined in regards to the curses. Function 8, *villainy*, states: "the villain causes harm

or injury to a member of the family" (386). In fairy tales featuring curses, this function may

describe the moment in which the curse is cast, if it is cast by a villain. Analyzing the way in

which this function happens will reveal something about the real misfortunes of each culture as

represented in the story. If the curse is not cast by a villain, it may instead be made manifest

through function 8a, *lack*: "one member of a family either lacks something or desires to have

something" (386). In this case there may or may not be significance in how the curse comes

about, and this must be questioned. The nature of the curse, however, will still reveal what it is

that the culture values, as this will be the thing that the protagonist lacks. Often the initial

misfortune of the curse will come to light through function 9, *mediation*: "misfortune or lack is

made known; the hero is approached with a request or command" (386). Such a "request or

command" would then refer to the achievement necessary to break the curse. Perhaps most

important in this analysis will be the details of function 19, *liquidation*: "the initial misfortune or

lack is liquidated" (387). This will represent the moment in the story when the curse is actually

broken. It is in the details of this moment that the strongest messages and morals of the story are

brought to light. Therefore this will be the function that will tell us the most about the culture's

values. An analysis of these functions in several older fairy tales and several modern fairy tales

will provide the needed contrast to identify any cultural shift of values.

In De Beaumont's *Beauty and the Beast,* the title male character is placed under a curse

for no apparent reason. The Beast explains to Beauty, "An evil fairy condemned me to remain in

that form until a beautiful girl would consent to marry me. She barred me from revealing my

intelligence. You were the only person in the world kind enough to be touched by the goodness

of my character" (41). There are a few interesting points to examine in this description.

First, we are given no explanation for why the fairy chose to curse the Beast except that she was "evil." This definitely qualifies as a *villainy* function. The Beast's ugliness was not a punishment for any misdeed, nor was it in any other way brought about by his own shortcomings. This may represent the fact that bad things can happen to good people for unknown reasons. In the pre-revolutionary France of the 18th century, senseless suffering abounded. The audience of Beaumont's tales would naturally accept and respond to it in literature.

Second, the nature of the curse inflicted on the Beast involves the loss of two things: his good looks and his intelligence. This provides an insight into the culture of Beaumont's time, showing that these two traits were considered the most necessary in order to win over a spouse. The feat of breaking the curse seems insurmountable with these two major disadvantages.

Finally, the details of *mediation*—how the curse is to be broken—must be considered. The fairy decrees that the Beast will maintain his form until "a beautiful girl [consents] to marry" him (41). Until he manages to find such a partner, he is trapped in his grisly form. Marriage was viewed as a necessary step in this time; there was no success without it. Furthermore, the Beast's explanation implies that the curse created a test of Beauty's virtues, as it revealed her kindness in looking past the outward appearance and loving the Beast for "the goodness of [his] character" (41). From the Beast's brief description, at least four key values of 18th-century France are revealed: beauty, intelligence, kindness, and the crucial step of marriage.

It is this last value that demands the most attention in this study. Evidently, this literary focus on the challenge and importance of pairing off has been around for a long time. For

centuries it was the most elemental task placed before each young person and it was seen as an absolutely necessary step in becoming a successful, contributing adult in society.

Some 200 years before Madame de Beaumont, Straparola wrote of a similar curse in *The Pig King*. Here, there is a bit of blur between the *villainy* and *lack* functions, as the fairies who cast the spell are neither good nor evil. A sleeping Ersilia receives a spell from three fairies, who we are told "held mankind somewhat in scorn" (42). They are taken with her beauty and think themselves to be doing her a service—and yet with their blessings the third fairy throws in the curse that Ersilia's son will "be born in the skin of a pig, with a pig's ways and manners" (43). She adds the terms of *mediation* in the curse contract: that he will remain in his pig-state "till he shall have three times taken a woman to wife" (43). She makes no mention of any particular character traits that are necessary to break the curse, but increases the Pig King's challenge of finding a mate by requiring that he achieve it three times. Once again, the task of marrying off the Pig Prince seems insurmountable—this time to the royal parents—as the prince is completely devoid of the crucial spouse-luring characteristics of good looks and manners. It is worth noting that although the fairies' requirement was that the prince take a third woman to wife and not necessarily that she be good, it is only because of Meldina's outstanding qualities that she survives the wedding night and succeeds in breaking the curse. She is described as "lovely", "grateful", "humble", and "amiable" (45). In other words, these cultural values, though not mentioned in the *mediation,* are made clear in the details of the *liquidation* function. Thus this story, like Beaumont's, highlights these desirable qualities and the ever-present task of marriage.

Such an analysis of curses in traditional fairy tales could go on and on. What do all of these examples have in common? Curses in *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* are famously broken by true love's kiss. However, as has been demonstrated already, this is not always the case. Meldina was not motivated by true love to marry the Pig Prince, but by her humble and grateful nature. Beauty herself stated of the Beast, "I may not be in love with him, but I feel respect, friendship, and gratitude toward him" (40). No, true love is not the universal curse-breaker. Nor is the goodness of heart that is commonly mentioned, as an analysis of the princess's role in breaking the curse of *The Frog Prince* will quickly reveal. The single element that these and so many other traditional fairy tales have in common is simply the finding of a spouse or companion and pairing off.

From the perspective of Maria Tatar and other fairy tale scholars, this emphasis makes sense for its time period. As Tatar explained in her *Beauty and the Beast: Introduction,* "what many of these tales seem to endorse in one cultural inflection after another is a reinscription of patriarchal norms, the subordination of female desire to male desire, and a glorification of filial duty and self-sacrifice" (27). In a time when women had little say in whom they would marry, let alone if they would marry, stories like these would encourage children and adolescents to accept the roles society was pushing upon them.

These societal roles would not, however, remain stagnant forever. Over 400 years have passed since Straparola wrote his fairy tales, over 200 years since Madame de Beaumont, and over 150 years since the brothers Grimm. In order to conclude which values are represented in today's fairy tales, it is necessary to analyze a modern example. Gail Carson Levine's 1997 novel, *Ella Enchanted,* provides a fascinating contrast to the aforementioned tales.

Ella's curse is given to her unintentionally—or rather, it is given with the best of intentions. The fairy Lucinda grants the gift of obedience to the newborn baby. This means that Ella must obey every order she is given—even, as the book jacket blurb suggests, if someone were to order her "to hop on one foot, cut off her hand, or betray her kingdom". This curse could then be described by the Propp function called *lack*. Yet Ella is not lacking in good looks, etiquette, or intelligence, as were all of the other protagonists encountered so far. Her lack is even more substantial by today's standards. What Ella lacks is her free will, her independence— something that our 21st-century American culture prizes more highly than almost anything else.

The function of *mediation* is not found in this story; there is no request made of Ella and no instruction given for how to break the curse. Even the absence of this function reveals something about our American culture: that we value the obstinate tenacity required to find a solution where none is provided.

Throughout the story, Ella tries several different methods of breaking the curse. First she tries to put an end to it by sheer grit, refusing to obey when a command endangers her own life. Her will is too weak and she fails to end the curse (44). Later she seeks out Lucinda and begs for mercy, which is not granted to her (127). This particular failed attempt teaches her that she must not depend on anyone but herself to accomplish her goal. This independence is a highly-held value in today's society, and one that parents wish to teach to their children. It was rarely taught in the previously mentioned traditional fairy tales, where the curses were always broken following the intervention of an outside character—generally, the potential spouse. The *liquidation,* or breaking of the curse, finally occurs when Ella's passion, loyalty, and love are brought to new heights and put to the test. Under the right circumstances, she is finally

sufficiently motivated to muster the determination and strength of will necessary to break the

curse. Modern readers are encouraged to develop this kind of determination and to fight with all

their strength to achieve their goals, as children in the 18th century were taught to accept the roles

that society placed before them. Notably, this is the first fairy tale in this analysis in which the

liquidation does not involve pairing off. On the contrary, Ella actually breaks the curse by

refusing to marry the prince.

While marriage is not necessarily looked down on in today's society, it has definitely

slipped from its once-prominent position. As feminist scholar Rosemary Auchmuty observed:

> Statistics and contemporary commentary show how marriage, once
>
> the ultimate and only acceptable status for women, has declined in
>
> social significance to such an extent that today it is a mere lifestyle
>
> choice. This is due to many factors, including the 'sexual
>
> revolution' of the 1960s, improved education and job opportunities
>
> for women, and divorce law reform, but the catalyst for change
>
> was the feminist critique that called for the abandonment (rather
>
> than the reform) of the institution, and made the unmarried state
>
> possible for women. (1)

Now that marriage is "a mere lifestyle choice", it need not be presented as the only option in the

literature that teaches values to the upcoming generation. Earlier on in *Ella Enchanted*, Prince

Char states that he has "resolved never to marry" (219). This resolution would certainly be

viewed as rebellious by Char's royal parents, who cling to the value and expectation of marriage.

In this way the King and Queen represent those in our society who are stuck in the past and

hesitate in the face of cultural evolution. Char, however, as the leading male hero in the tale, sets

a new standard for the present generation. He is independent and free-thinking and will

determine for himself whether or not marriage will be his "lifestyle choice". Ultimately, Ella

and Prince Char do marry and live happily ever after, but only after they have both refused to do

so upon anyone else's orders and decided that it is what they truly desire.

Ella Enchanted is not the only fairy tale to teach these modern values. The 2006 film

Penelope presents a modern fairy tale about a girl fighting to overcome yet another curse. She is

the unfortunate victim of a curse cast by an angry witch on her family generations before her

birth; as the first female born to her family since the curse, she bears the face of a pig. The *lack*

function is fulfilled as poor Penelope lives a life of solitude hiding her face from the world. She

lacks companionship and the "normal" life she so strongly desires. The *mediation* appears once

again in the terms of the curse: Penelope is told she will only be free of the curse when "one of

her own" accepts her and loves her as she is. Her parents assume that this means that someone

of blue blood must love their daughter.

From the nature of Penelope's curse one can see that physical beauty still matters in

today's culture. Penelope suffers ostracism and ridicule because of her deformity. However, she

learns that wealth and beauty are not as important as her parents have led her to believe. To

Penelope's parents, appearances are everything, so they keep Penelope locked up to preserve the

family's honorable name. In this way they, like Char's parents in *Ella Enchanted,* come to

represent old-fashioned and outdated values. However, it becomes clear through the course of

the story that looks are not everything in today's world. When Penelope finally ventures out on

her own and reveals her face to the world, it does not take long for society to be charmed by

Penelope's personality and accept her as one of their own. Penelope begins to recognize that there is more to her identity than her physical appearance. She begins to develop confidence and self-respect. Penelope, like Char, is juxtaposed with old-fashioned parents to show a preference for "new and improved" social values.

Finally, the *liquidation* function—the breaking of the curse—reveals the fairy tale's moral. Penelope, like Ella, finds that the power to break the curse has been within her all along. When she finally learns to love and accept herself, the witch's terms are satisfied and the curse is broken. Thus the modern audience learns that self-respect and acceptance are much more powerful and valuable than one's physical appearance. Interestingly, the curse is again broken in the very moment that the heroine is refusing to wed. Penelope decides that she would rather live with the curse forever than marry a man she does not love. Once again the old expectation to marry at any cost has been undermined, as Penelope realizes that she may be alone forever because of this decision and makes it anyway.

As the analysis of these fairy tale curses has demonstrated, fairy tales are teaching different lessons today than they did in centuries past. Why, then, is this drastic shift in fairy tale morality necessary in today's society? Fairy tales have adapted because society has adapted. Today's parents and teachers recognize either consciously or subconsciously the messages that are portrayed in fairy tales and they have provided the demand for stories that teach values that are updated and modern. Scholars acknowledge that yesterday's heroes will not serve the needs of today's children. In *Girl vs. Test,* an article on the timidity that young girls must overcome in their academic pursuits, Lisa Damour discusses the very real impact that fictional role models have on modern children. She theorizes about the impact Cinderella (as an outdated role model)

or Mulan (as a modern role model) would have on modern students as they face standardized

testing:

> Just think of poor Cinderella. She can't even stand up to her
>
> stepsisters when they tear her dress apart, and she might still be
>
> weeping in the courtyard if it weren't for the intervention of her
>
> fairy godmother. Picturing Cinderella at the SAT, it is easy to see a
>
> young woman who dissolves in the face of an unexpectedly tough
>
> question…If we imagine Mulan at the SAT, we know that she
>
> would show up with a take-no-prisoners attitude, eager to prove
>
> what she can do, and in the mood to kick that test around and come
>
> out on top. Does she run into questions that knock her back? You
>
> bet. Does she go cry in the courtyard? No way. She leans forward
>
> and tackles the next question with renewed vigor.

If modern parents and teachers are hoping to instill Mulan-like confidence and other

modern values in today's children, the fairy tales they use as a teaching device must be adapted

accordingly. Similarly, in a society where marriage is no longer a person's only life path and

where it is commonly recognized that there are more important things than good looks and polite

passivity, fairy tales must reflect updated societal priorities.

Fairy tales, as a literary genre that is ever-changing and adapting, provide a unique

resource in understanding the evolution of human society. It has been demonstrated in this

analysis that fairy tale curses reveal valuable insights into the cultural values of the fairy tale's

time. In traditional fairy tales they reveal traditional values; in modern fairy tales they reveal

modern values. As long as people continue to live, learn and change, fairy tales will reflect this cultural history. Where there is an awareness of the rich resource available in this genre, there is a remarkable advantage in understanding human morality now and throughout the years of generations to come.

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