



Cinderella, Margaret Tarrant, 1888-1959

Fairy Tales and Critical Literacy

In terms of critical literacy in intermediate and high school classrooms, it is always helpful to look at context. In March, 2015, the live-action feature film "Cinderella" directed by Kenneth Branagh opens in theatres.

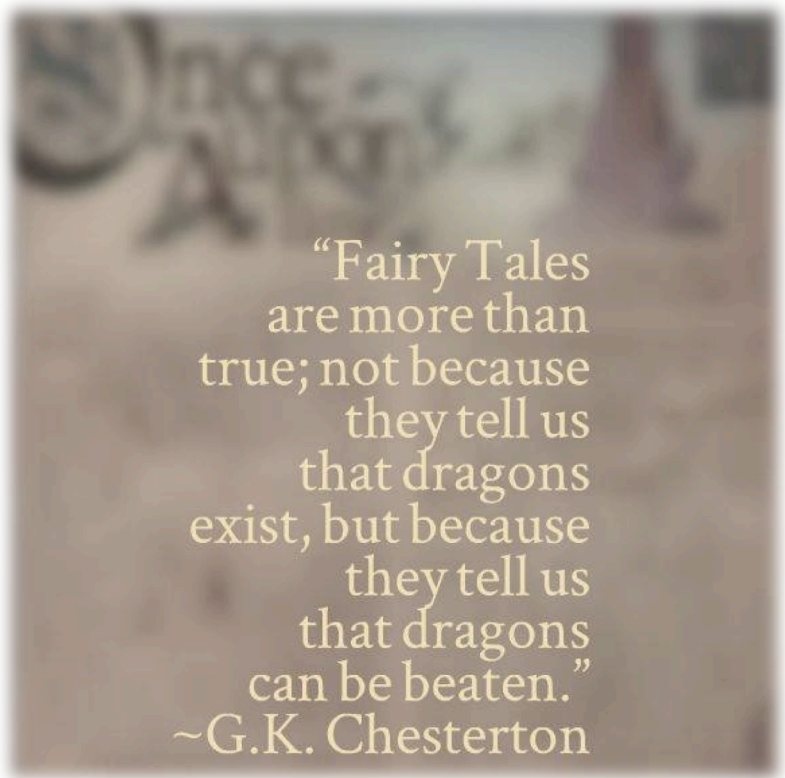
This certainly gives us a teachable moment and a great opportunity to look at the whole question of archetype, and specifically the Cinderella archetype, in all its many forms.

Imagine the rich conversation around topics like... "at heart, every girl really wants to be a princess" or "girls are brought up to believe in being rescued" or "no male can live up to the expectations created by the archetype of the prince or the knight in shining armour"...

Cinderella and fairy tale archetype is an appropriate topic, subject or theme for almost any literacy class in (K-12) depending on the approach of the teacher. Younger students would use an expurgated version of the fairy tale, but older students could look at the original tales, which are quite gruesome.

This link is an excellent place to start:

<https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/langandlit/article/viewFile/9777/7691>



For intermediate and high school students the discussion can include an examination of archetypes in literature. Cinderella and other fairy tales (the princess, the prince or knight, the stepmother, the fairy godmother)

Other topics:

- gender roles in Cinderella
- compare/contrast Cinderella versions (Grimm/Perrault, original/modern, print/film)
- fairy tales like Cinderella—are the messages positive or negative for young readers?
- why are fairy tales experiencing such a renaissance -- think of Grimm, Once Upon a Time, Into the Woods, Mirror Mirror, Ella Enchanted, Tangled, Frozen....

The Cinderella Story (from a talk given by Jane McMillan)

Following the huge success of Frozen, Disney is set to release a live-action version of the classic story of Cinderella. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, the film will be in theatres on March 13th -- just in time for the March break. The release of the film is sure to create a flurry of interest in all things Cinderella, so it is a good time to have a look at the timeless tale.

The subject of fairy tales is a fascinating one. Fairy tales such as Cinderella form an enduring part of our collective psyche and have been with us for centuries. In fact, at least 350 tellings of the tale exist, starting with the one recorded by Tuan Ch'eng-shih of China in the middle of the ninth century.

Symbolic narratives endure through the generations as they are re-iterated and re-enacted over and over again in stories, rituals, and the media. How often does a novel or movie plot involve a “damsel in distress” or a Cinderella-like “rags to riches” transformation? The psychologist Carl Jung wrote extensively about how we are influenced by the symbols and images that we see repeated in stories and tales of old. Jung believed that over time, certain symbols --called archetypes --

appeared so often in stories, myths, and legends that they become part of our “blueprint” or our collective unconscious.

Familiar archetypes include the hero, the princess, the mother, the mentor (or fairy godmother) the scapegoat, the outcast, the ill-fated lovers, and of course the stepmother. How does this relate to early literacy? It is related because the Cinderella story is much more than a little tale about a girl who finds her true love. It’s an enduring set of images that have had a huge influence on the role of girls and women in society.

Aside from the themes about beauty, goodness, dreams, mistreatment by others, rescue, rags to riches, and the whole idea of wish fulfilment, readers must consider the situation with Cinderella’s stepmother. Author Laura Melmed thinks that children can relate to Cinderella’s feelings of alienation and abandonment. “Even if a girl doesn’t have a wicked stepmother, at times she feels her mother is the wicked stepmother,” Ms. Melmed says. “Every kid experiences the feeling of being adopted, as though they don’t belong in their family.”

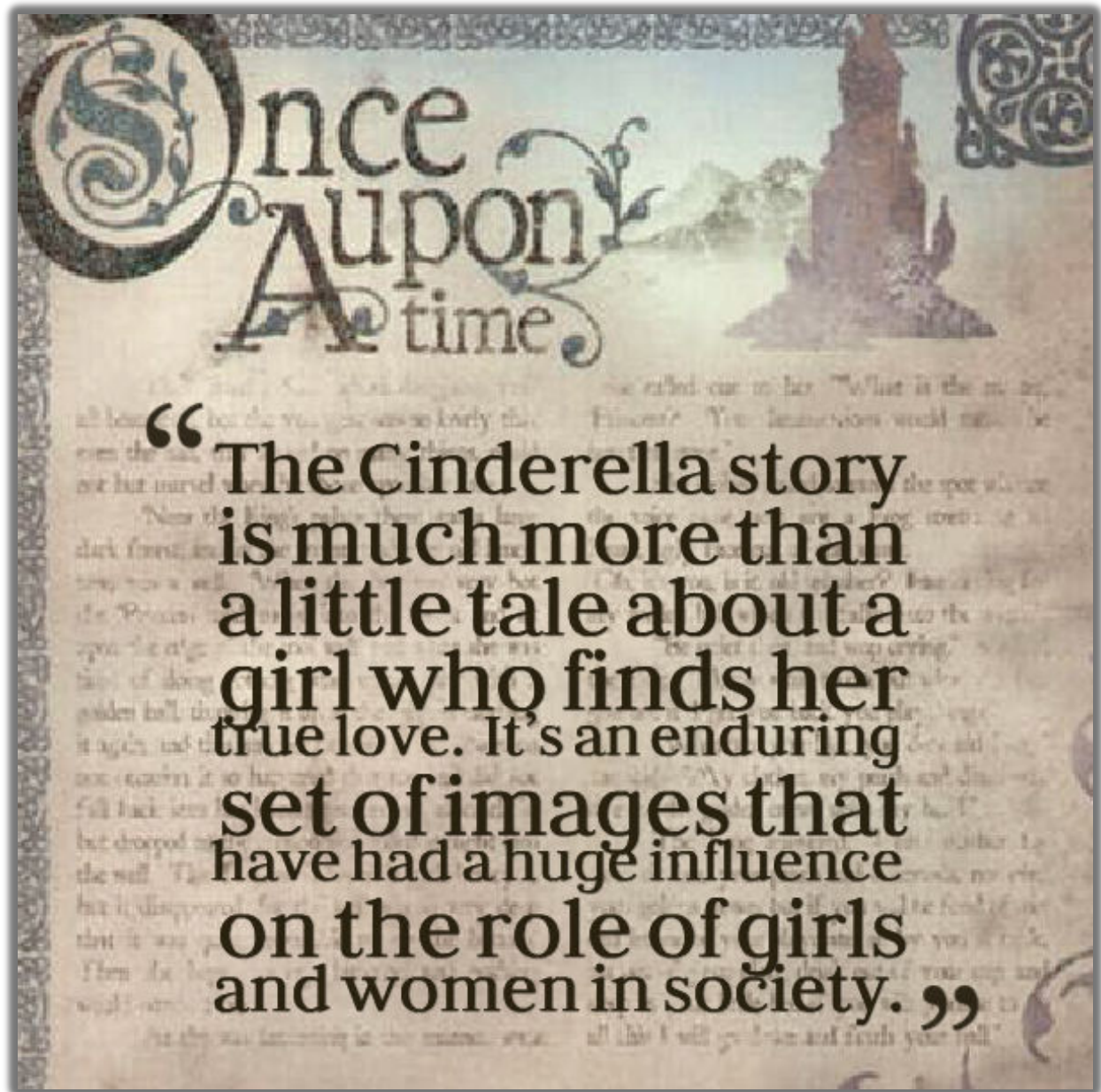
Do I think we should avoid reading fairy tales like Cinderella because it promotes the archetype of “the princess” who is waiting for her prince to come? Absolutely not! There is simply no avoiding the Cinderella metaphor – and in fact, it is the basis of many great stories including *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Persuasion*, and movies such as *Pretty Woman* and *Ever After*.

The Cinderella archetype is everywhere – it is simply unavoidable and trying to fight every manifestation of a gender stereotype is pointless. Rather, parents and teachers can use the opportunity to engage in a rich dialogue about the messages in the particular fairy tale, story, or movie. Reading Cinderella together provides a chance to ask questions and have a great conversation about important topics such as beauty, love, relationships, gender roles and the reality of “happy ever after” stories. Conversations such as this – gentle and age appropriate -- help

both boys and girls understand that fairy tale characters are symbolic and do not necessarily reflect the attitudes and actions we should adopt in daily life.

Article: Psychology Behind the Cinderella Complex

<http://www.empowher.com/mental-health/content/psychology-behind-cinderella-complex?page=0>,



Grimm's Fairy Tales Really Are Very Grim

(from a talk given by Jane McMillan, 2014)

If you are looking for a gentle, soothing tale for little ones, don't look to the brothers Grimm. Grimm's fairy tales are dark – and I mean really dark. It's just over two hundred years since the first publication of the books that brought us Hansel and Gretel, Rumpelstiltskin, Cinderella and 200 other stories. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* or *Children's and Household Tales* in 1812. In the Grimm version written in German, the Cinderella tale is called "Aschenputtel."

How dark are these tales? Let's have a look.

In the French Cinderella, Cinderella forgives her stepsisters and finds good husbands for them. Contrast that ending with an excerpt from Cinderella written by the brothers Grimm:

"Then were the two sisters glad, for they had pretty feet. The eldest went with the shoe into her room and wanted to try it on, and her mother stood by. But she could not get her big toe into it, and the shoe was too small for her. Then her mother gave her a knife and said, "Cut the toe off; when thou art Queen thou wilt have no more need to go on foot." The maiden cut the toe off, forced the foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain, and went out to the King's son."

The prince only notices that the sister is not the right girl when a dove tells him that there is blood streaming from the shoe. When at last the prince finds Cinderella, doves peck out the stepsisters' eyes. Pretty gruesome.

Why were Grimm's fairy tales so grim?

A very informative article about Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in "National Geographic" makes the point that the two brothers, patriots, determined to preserve Germanic folktales, and were only accidental entertainers. They did not set out to create a children's collection of fairy tales. Instead, they set out to preserve Germany's oral tradition

by collecting stories told to them, in other words, folklore. Not until several editions of their collection were published did the brothers realize that children had become a major audience. According to the article, "Once the Brothers Grimm sighted this new public, they set about refining and softening their tales, which had originated centuries earlier as earthy peasant fare."

Despite some of the dark themes and grotesque images in Grimm's Fairy Tales, most of the stories end in "happily ever after" and have strong messages about hope, courage and resilience. A great read, but for older readers, not necessarily for young children.

To read the full translation of Aschenputtel:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm/cinderella.html>

Cinderella by Charles Perrault

This version, titled "Cendrillon" in French, is perhaps the most well known. Sometimes called "The Little Glass Slipper" it has familiar elements such as the glass slipper, the pumpkin coach and the fairy Godmother. You can this version of Cinderella and other fairy tales in the Blue Fairy Book by Andrew Lang. Click here:

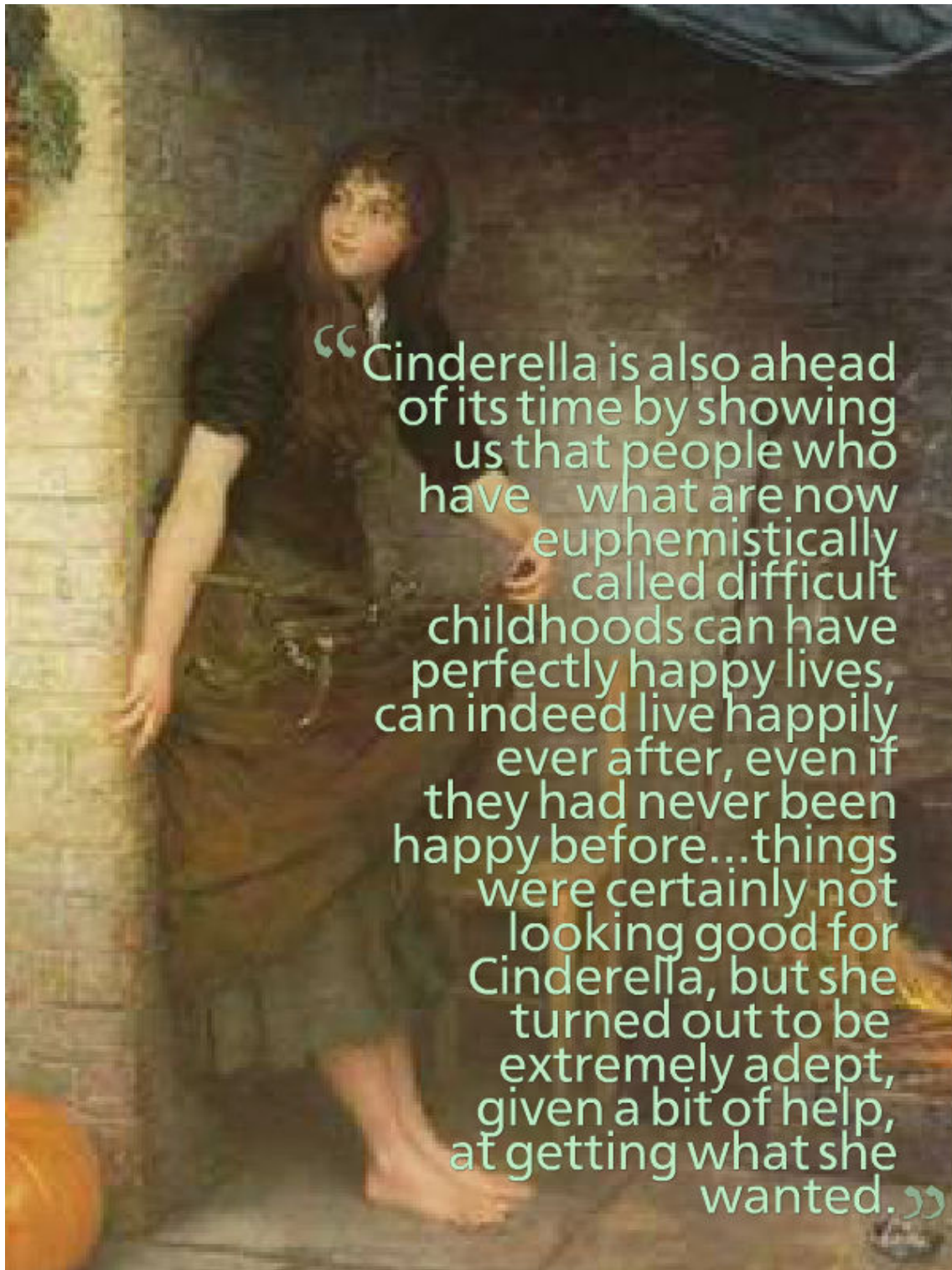
<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/l/lang/andrew/l26bf/chapter7.html>

The Importance of Fairy Tales

Television programs such as Grimm and Once Upon a Time have prompted significant debate over whether or not fairy tales are appropriate for children to read in the classroom and at home. The Telegraph UK has reported that 25% of parents surveyed said they wouldn't read fairy tales to a child under five years old because they didn't teach a good lesson or were too scary.

In an opinion piece, Melissa Taylor, blogger, writer and teacher, talks about fairy tales and concludes "that these parents have lost their reasoning skills – completely. For example, the reason not to read Goldilocks is that it sends a message to steal. Hardly. If anything, the message is don't break into houses because a family of bears might live there."

<http://imaginationsoup.net/2012/02/fairy-tales-are-essential-to-childhood/>



Quoted from Adam Phillips, *The Guardian*, 2008
Painting: *Cinderella* by Valentine Prinsep, 1899

Fairy Tales and Margaret Atwood

"Happy endings of the Cinderella kind do exist in stories, of course, but they have been relegated largely to genre fiction, such as Harlequin romances."

Margaret Atwood

Canadian literary icon, Margaret Atwood, has written extensively on fairy tales and how the tales have evolved.

From a lecture Atwood gave in 1994:

"Also, I was exposed to the complete, unexpurgated Grimm's Fairy Tales at an impressionable age. Fairy tales had a bad reputation among feminists for a while -- partly because they'd been cleaned up, on the erroneous supposition that little children don't like gruesome gore, and partly because they'd been selected to fit the 'fifties Prince Charming Is Your Goal ethos. So Cinderella and the Sleeping Beauty were okay... a woman who was smarter than her husband, was not. But many of these tales were originally told and retold by women, and these unknown women left their mark. There is a wide range of heroines in these tales; passive good girls, yes, but adventurous, resourceful women as well, and proud ones, and slothful ones, and foolish ones, and envious and greedy ones, and also many wise women and a variety of evil witches, both in disguise and not, and bad stepmothers and wicked ugly sisters and false brides as well. The stories, and the figures themselves, have immense vitality, partly because no punches are pulled -- in the versions I read, the barrels of nails and the red-hot shoes were left intact -- and also because no emotion is unrepresented. Singly, the female characters are limited and two-dimensional. But put all together, they form a rich five-dimensional picture."

From *Spotty-Handed Villainesses: Problems Of Female Bad Behaviour In The Creation Of Literature* by Margaret Atwood.

An excellent interview with Atwood:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXKPYhBaLe0

Cinderella and Her Familiar Archetypes

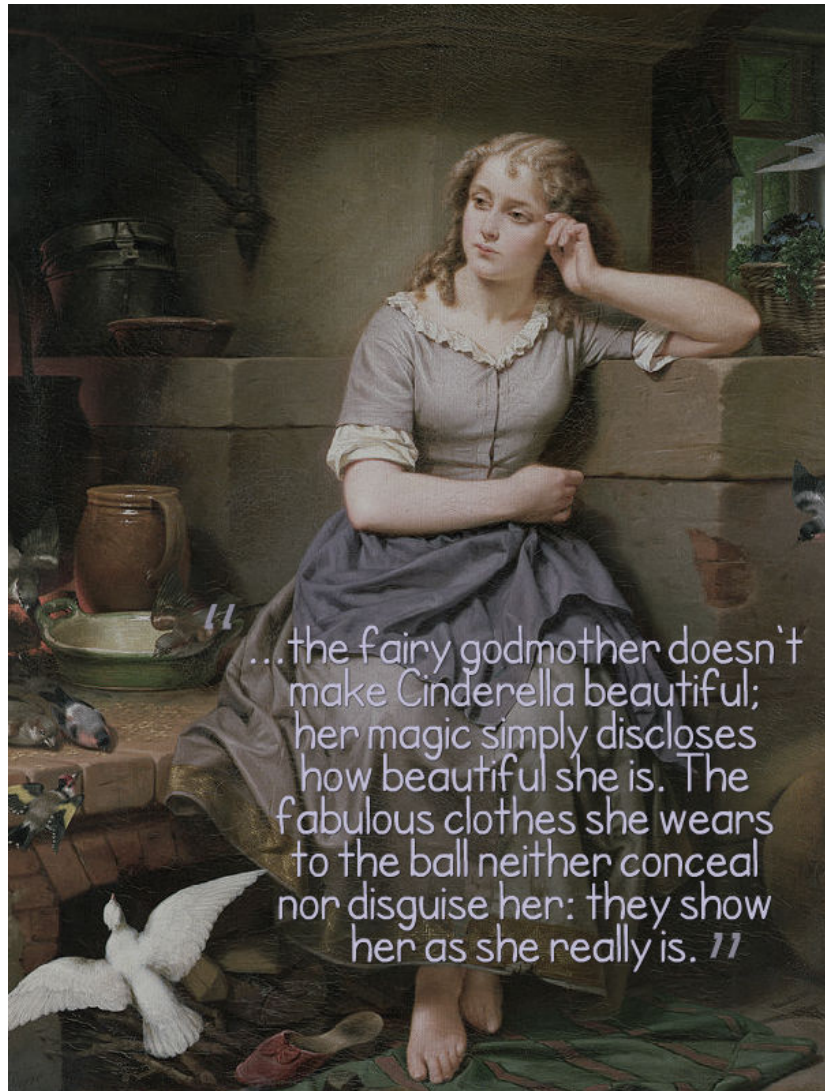
from *Once Upon a Quill*

Cinderella is an archetype. In all her many forms.

The word “archetype” is Greek—literally “first molded”, or the original pattern copied forever after. Archetypes are used by psychologists to break people down into manageable bits and pigeonhole them. (No offense. None taken.) They are also used by teachers to determine how to best reach their students. And they are used in literature, by writers who want a story to be both deep and tall.

It’s not cheating to use an archetype—you as a writer just need to be sure you’re not letting your archetype do all the work for you.

1. Cinderella is our first archetype. Not so much of a “damsel in distress” as a “persecuted heroine.” She is good, thoughtful (or clever), and usually has animals helping her through rough patches. Persecuted heroines are easy for girls to identify with—we all feel persecuted, sometime.



Cinderella and the Birds, English School

2. The classic Evil Stepmother. This archetype is so prevalent in fairy tales that the mere mention of a stepmother prods each reader to assume the new parent will be evil. In some versions of this story, the stepmother is cruel. In others, abusive. In yet others, she meets a grisly end. But never is her treatment of Cinderella accidental or careless. She chooses another child to promote over Cinderella.

3. The step-sisters (or regular sisters, in other versions) depend on the variant you're working from: in some versions, they are cruel to Cindy; in others, one is kinder or both are indifferent. These sisters always side with the stepmother (or parents, in other versions). Siblings don't always get along, and here we have a good example of a family relationship from a single point of view. If Cinderella is the persecuted heroine we're going to side with, this is the family we want her to escape. The stepmother may choose to be dreadful to her child, but that same decision by the stepsister looks very different to the reader. The

stepmother may be considered with anger or hatred, but the stepsisters earn contempt. And, frequently, an added epithet of "ugly."



Sir William Quiller Orchardson - Cinderella 1873

4. In other versions, Cinderella's godmother is a bull, or a sheep, or an old stick. All that to say, the godmother is the trickiest of all the archetypes in the story. She doesn't show up until absolutely needed, and she doesn't stick around to fix anything in the aftermath. But Cinderella is called a fairy tale because this is where the fairy comes into play. Many a writer's imagination takes flight with this archetype's inclusion. (How could I tell this story *without* the godmother? What if the godmother never helped--how would Cinderella save herself? This archetype is helpful, but not dynamic. She equips Cinderella for the party, but she DOES NOT remake Cinderella or influence anyone's decisions or actions.



5. Be he charming or sincere, too old or too young, Cinderella must have her prince. Always, this prince is romantic enough to be enraptured by Cinderella's beauty. Prince Charming, as an archetype, is romantic enough to swear to marry the owner of a shoe, but also restrained enough to keep from chasing Cinderella until after she runs away. (Again, real life isn't always this cut and dried.)

Cinderella

Sir John Everett Millais (1829-96) English Artist

Persecuted Heroines, Ugly Stepsisters, Evil Stepmothers, Laissez-faire Godmothers, and Romantic Princes aside, these are stock characters that are hard to avoid when writing. They call to deep parts of the human psyche. More the female psyche than the male one, let's be honest, but call they do. But these are a few of the archetypes that make for a solid framework on which a good story can be built.

Judith Viorst, *Cinderella*

You might remember Judith Viorst as the author of the children's book, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. Viorst is also a poet. In this short poem, Viorst presents a slightly different perspective on Cinderella and the prince -- illustrating how fairy tales are endlessly available to interpretation.

And Then the Prince Knelt Down
and Tried to Put the Glass Slipper
on Cinderella's Foot

How
the Cinderella Story probably
actually happened.

"I really didn't notice that
he had a funny nose. And he
certainly looked better all dressed
up in fancy clothes. He's not
nearly as attractive as he seemed
the other night. So I think
I'll just pretend that this glass
slipper feels too tight."

Judith Viorst, from *Don't Bet*

on the Prince

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