

# *Women in Grimm's Fairy Tales*

## Course Information

*Alaina Bierman*

*This course is targeted towards gender studies majors only. This course provides an insightful analysis on the way women are portrayed in literature, and have been for centuries. This course also allows the students to gain a strong understanding of sexism amongst women, and the difficult expectations held for women.*

## Course Description

*My sources will argue the idea that in earlier literature (the examples all coming from Grimm's fairy tales) women were often treated as worse than third class citizens. While each source examines a different aspect of the ways in which women were mistreated, abused, and taken advantage of, they all come back to the general theme that a woman's values are based on her physical appearance and not her abilities and intellects.*

## Course Schedule

## **Unit 1: *The Little Mermaid***

**BIG Question:**

What values and ideas concerning female body image and relationships does this story seem to have?

**Argument of the Unit:**

*This story seems to encourage the idea that a woman's body and beauty is more valuable than her voice. Unhealthy relationships are also a big problem in this story, as the female character commits suicide following the rejection of a man she falls in love with.*

**Key Words:**

- 1.) *Body dysmorphia*
- 2.) *Pain-Tolerance*
- 3.) *Depression*
- 4.) *Love*
- 5.) *Coping Methods*
- 6.) *Obsession*

**Link to Reading:**

[The Little Mermaid](#)

**Annotation of Reading:**

*Sirenetta is a young mermaid in this short story who falls in love with a prince that she saves from a storm. She brings him to shore and must leave before he wakes up, so he doesn't know she is his savior. Instead, he is awakened by a different maiden and falls instantly in love with her, unbeknownst to Sirenetta. Sirenetta can not get the prince out of her mind, so she makes a deal with an evil sea witch to swap her tail for legs. However, Sirenetta must give up her voice, every step she takes will be agonizingly painful, and if the prince marries anyone else she will dissolve into seafoam. Sirenetta agrees, and goes to shore as a woman. She befriends the prince, but his heart belongs to the maiden he saw on the beach, and this causes Sirenetta to be depressed, and she cries every night. Eventually the maiden comes back to marry the prince, and Sirenetta knows she will soon die. However, her sisters give her a magic knife to kill the prince and save herself, but Sirenetta can't do it, so instead she throws herself into the ocean to perish. Sirenetta gives up her voice for an "ideal body," despite knowing the transformation will leave her in pain for the rest of her life, falls into a depression, and eventually commits suicide. The dark themes of this story send out dangerous messages to women and young girls about what traits they should value, and how they should cope with relationships, rejection, and depression.*

**Unit 2: Mulan****BIG Question:**

*As the story of Hua Mulan (there are several different translations of Mulan's name, so I've picked this one but there could be several other ones as you read. Don't be confused, it's all the same Mulan!) changes over time, what ideas about women and femininity are added to her story? What is taken away from her story? Why do you think as the versions change over time there is more sex involved in the stories?*

*Extra Credit: Read the Ballad of Mulan vs. Sui Tang Romance for more answers to those questions. Be sure to use examples from both the poem and play!*

**Argument of the Unit:** Despite putting her life on hold to become a great warrior, Hua Mulan always goes back to her traditional role as a woman-very eagerly in fact- when the war is over and she is allowed to return home. Hua Mulan also mixes femininity and masculinity, and is sexualized by others as a result.

**Key Words:**

- 1.) *Loyalty*
- 2.) *Cross-dressing*
- 3.) *“Feet binding”*
- 4.) *Concubine*
- 5.) *“Traditional gender roles in China”*

**Link to Reading:**

[Mulan](#)

**Annotation of Reading:**

*Hua Mulan is a fearless, brave warrior in all accounts of her tale. However, as time goes on, the story becomes more sexual and tragic. In the earliest versions, the only real difference in the stories is slight disputing over Hua Mulan’s origin. They all agree that she leaves to take her father’s place, and is honored as a great warrior when she returns. However, as the versions change over time, we actually see Mulan lose some of her power and rights. She is sexualized in different versions, and is even ordered to be a concubine in one, but instead kills herself to remain “pure.” Hua Mulan is treated less and less like a woman and more like an object as time progresses, showing the way her role as a strong warrior disintegrates over time, as many couldn’t cope with the fact that she was considered “the greatest warrior in China” and also a cross-dressing woman.*

### **Unit 3: Cinderella**

**BIG Question:**

*What does this story say about the value of a woman’s own body? Does the drastic steps the step sisters take to look beautiful surprising? Why or why not?*

**Argument of the Unit:** *Cinderella is a terrible story about family turning on each other. Beyond that, it shows the extremes that women will go to in order to alter themselves to appear more attractive.*

**Key Words:**

- 1.) *Body Mutation*
- 2.) *Loyalty*
- 3.) *Depression*
- 4.) *Body Dysmorphia*
- 5.) *High Society vs. Low Society*
- 6.) *Standards Among Women*

**Link to Reading:**

[Cinderella](#)

**Annotation of Reading:**

*In the story of Cinderella, a young girl lives with her step mother and step sisters. They treat her terrible and force her to work as if she were their maid and not their sister. When the chance comes for all of them to go to a ball, Cinderella begs her family to let her go, but they will not let her. However, a fairy god mother helps her, and she is able to go to the ball and dance with the prince. She must leave before midnight and loses track of time, barely making it back to her carriage and losing her shoe in the process. The prince finds the shoe and travels the land in search of the maiden whose foot will fit the slipper. Both of Cinderella's stepsisters cut off bits of their feet in order to try and fit into the shoe, but their lies are discovered, and eventually the prince finds Cinderella, and she and him are married in the castle. The extremes that these women go to for beauty is sickening, and the fact that they are still surpassed by their sister, who has the "natural" beauty is a commentary on the mutations women undergo in society in order to appear beautiful.*

**Unit 4: Sleeping Beauty****BIG Question:**

What themes can be found throughout the story that promote the idea that women are subservient to

men? What kind of punishments are present in history for women who don't obey and are these themes present in the story?

**Argument of the Unit:**

*This story, which is meant to be a child's fairy tale, promotes rape and the murder of women who disobey their husbands. It also justifies slut shaming and the shaming of women with fertility problems.*

**Key Words:**

1. Barren,
2. Slut-Shaming,
3. Rape
4. Consent
5. Infidelity

**Link to Reading:**

[\*Sleeping Beauty\*](#)

**Annotation of Reading:**

Grimm's version of "Sleeping Beauty" tells a tale of a beautiful young girl named Talia. At the age of 17, she injures herself on a spindle and falls into a "death like sleep." Her father, in his despair, has her placed on a beautiful bed, then orders everyone else to leave the castle until she awakens. Eventually, a young (already married) king happens upon Talia and rapes and impregnates her, and the birth of her twins nine months later awakens Talia from her sleep. The king goes back to visit Talia and tells her what happened, and she is overjoyed and they fall in love. The king promises to return soon and leaves, and his unfaithfulness is clear to the queen, who tries to have Talia and her children murdered. The king kills her instead, and he, Talia, and his children live happily ever after. This tale promotes infidelity, the rape and murder of women, and even ends with the proverb, "Those who fortune favors, find good luck even in their sleep."

**Unit 5: Goose Girl**

**BIG Question:**

*Why do some believe a woman's value directly corresponds with her social class/wealth?*

**Argument of the Unit:**

*For many centuries, the only type of women with any kind of authority and power were of the most elite social classes. All other women were given almost no rights, and those that tried to climb the social ladder were often belittle, tortured, or even killed as a warning to others.*

**Key Words:**

- 1.) Social Class
- 2.) Gender Roles
- 3.) Elite
- 4.) First-Class Citizen
- 5.) Third-Class Citizen
- 6.) Second-Class Citizen

**Link to Reading:**

[Goose Girl](#)

**Annotation of Reading:**

*In this fairy tale, a young princess and her chamber maid travel to meet the princess's future husband, a soon to be king from another country. Along the way, the chamber maid steals the princess's jewels, riches, clothes, and her horse. She then switches roles with the princess, with her as the bride and the princess as the chambermaid. While the prince is happy to marry the false bride, once her lies are uncovered she is placed naked in a barrel full of nails, and rolled through the village until she dies. The chambermaid's beauty, intelligence, and abilities could not save her from the fact that she was a common girl. The young girl was brutally treated for something she could not help, and her treatment can be seen as a commentary on the way poor women were viewed during this time period: completely disposable and therefore worthless.*

**Unit 6: Peter Pan**

**BIG Question:**

*Think about Tinker Bell's character and what it says about the way women have been viewed throughout history. Why does she appear to be reliant on Peter Pan? Why is she terribly jealous of Wendy?*

**Argument of the Unit:**

Tinker Bell, the small female fairy who is unable to speak, is shown as being jealous, envious of others relationships, aggressive, vain, and snobbish. Bell is a stereotype of a woman who cannot live without men and is in fact male-crazy, and her character is a terrible role model for young girls.

**Key Words:**

- 1.) *Gender Roles*
- 2.) *Femininity*
- 3.) *Femme Fatale*
- 4.) *Gender Stereotypes*
- 5.) *Sexualization*

**Link to Reading:**

[Tinker Bell](#)

**Annotation of Reading:**

The author argues that Tinkerbell is the embodiment of a stereotypical woman during that time. More so, she's an ideal woman. She's attractive, doesn't wear a lot of clothing, and literally has no voice to speak. Wendy on the other hand, is a beautiful, sophisticated, young girl who immediately steals Peter pan away from Tinkerbell, which infuriates her to the point where she almost dies. Tinker Bell is portrayed as the "other woman" or the woman guys want to fool around with while Wendy is the one a man should settle down with. This story negatively depicts women and highlights the grotesque way certain men view their "ideal woman."



## Unit 7: Snow White

**BIG Question:**

*Do your opinions match the opinion's of this article regarding Snow White's role (and traditional female roles in general), as well as the opinion that Snow White is one of the more feminist fairy tales written?*

**Argument of the Unit:**

*Snow White, while it does have some alarming themes such as vanity and murder among women, and Snow White being forced into a tradition female gender role to survive, and being kissed without her knowledge, also has some feminist elements. Snow White is a motherly figure to those in need, is kind and passionate, and is in the end rewarded for her actions.*

**Key Words:**

- 1.) Consent
- 2.) Vanity
- 3.) Beauty
- 4.) Poison
- 5.) Feminism
- 6.) Sexism
- 7.) Misogyny

**Link to Reading:**

[Snow White](#)

**Annotation of Reading:**

*The author's argument is clear that while there are some aspects of the story that should be replaced, there are still some parts of the story that make Snow White a sort of feminist in her own right. This gives a different, very valuable outlook on the way women are portrayed in fairy tales. Snow White is an anomaly. She undergoes hardships, and is the victim of stereotyping and a murder plot because she's pretty, but she is one of the few characters who never changes her appearance to please someone else. She stays true to herself, and analyzing this story gives a fresh perspective about feminism in early fairy tales that the other stories lack.*