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Fairy Tales and the Heroic Cycle in the Modern World: Modern Authors

Empowering the Female Heroine

by

Susan E. Lamberton

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York
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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction - Fairy Tales in the Modern World 1

Chapter Two: Modern Retellings Empower Females 10

Chapter Three: Gender Roles in *Harry Potter* 30

Chapter Four: Conclusion 49

Works Cited 53
Abstract

Modern retellings of fairy tales, and new stories in the heroic tradition, serve a dual purpose in late twentieth century and twenty-first century American culture: they entertain readers with fantastic tales of heroic feats and mystical occurrences, and they promote cultural or political messages, such as gender coding, to an audience in an attractive and compelling way. These retellings highlight and comment upon social, political, gender and other issues in modern culture. Francesca Lia Block and Anne Sexton both have retold fairy tales in new forms and settings to question the roles of women in modern society. In its updated version, Block’s Cinderella story offers women the option to repair the relationships with their sisters, valuing familial love alongside the security and love the prince offers. These authors are challenging the accepted gendered norms of behavior and asking readers to consider their own positions within the gender hierarchy in place within society. An example of this is J.K. Rowling, who puts a new spin on Joseph Campbell’s heroic cycle in her Harry Potter series of books. Rowling is revising this familiar pattern by moving to a more corporate model of heroism focusing on a team rather than a single-hero narrative. The team is of mixed-gender, where the combination of stereotypically male and female traits is what makes the team effective. Rowling highlights previously undervalued traits typically coded as feminine by showing the strengths of the female characters in her novels as different from the strengths of the males, but equal. The coming of age of the three main characters Harry, Ron, and Hermione becomes a main theme in the novels.
Chapter One:
Fairy Tales in the Modern World

Modern retellings of fairy tales, and new stories in the heroic tradition, serve a dual purpose in late twentieth century and twenty-first century American culture: they entertain readers with fantastic tales of heroic feats and mystical occurrences, and they promote cultural or political messages, such as gender coding, to an audience in an attractive and compelling way. According to folklore scholar Jack Zipes, "many of the classical fairy tales have helped disseminate stereotypical notions of gender and race and have indoctrinated children through stereotypes – not through archetypes – to believing in set patterns of behavior in accord with patriarchal codes" (Zipes 184). Modern retellings turn the "patriarchal codes" that Zipes invokes on their heads. Fairy tales reflect, both new and old, the culture and time period within which they are written. Some newer versions rooted in the post feminist movement, rail against the patriarchy and encourage a new outlook for today’s girls and women.

In the introduction to her anthology, Fearless Girls, Wise Women & Beloved Sisters, Kathleen Ragan discusses the absence of the strong female heroine in the fairy tales and stories that are readily available to most children. She uses Dr. Seuss as an example from her own experience, where she found precious few females present at all, and the ones she did find were presented in a negative light. Ragan explains why she feels it is important for girls to have positive, strong female characters to identify with. She explains: "I returned to folktales as an adult … because I felt that somehow they were meant to answer questions and fulfill a need."
When only a few stories in a volume have female protagonists, it is impossible to acquire a range of characters” (xxv). Ragan goes on to explain that after reading thousands of tales from all over the world, she found the range of female characters she wanted, enabling her to identify with aspects of each of them, instead of trying to fit herself into the imperfect mold of only the one or two examples she had previously. While Block changes the familiar tales to make the weak females stronger, Ragan found tales from various other cultures that provided her with the strong role model she missed in the tales she read as a child.

Originally preserved through oral tradition, fairy tales naturally evolved as the story tellers added and subtracted elements to make the story fit the audience. Once the stories were set down in print, they remained fairly stable throughout several generations, with changes mostly happening as a result of translation or cultural issues. Once the film industry decided to translate these stories into animated films intended for children, the stories began changing faster, then ceased to change and were fixed in celluloid images. For example, Snow White was a tale that was transmitted orally (and therefore was ever-changing) until the Grimm brothers recorded and published it. Once in print, the tale was fixed in the form one can now find in a copy of Grimm’s Fairy Tales (1812-15). Disney then retold the tale in animated format, fixing it in yet another medium. In the Disney retelling, Snow White is a simple-minded, submissive girl only too happy to be exploited by one faction after another. This retelling, released in 1938, reflects the original, including ideals about female behavior from the post World War One era. Later, children’s books are
issued with sugary, watered-down versions of the original tales, which are viewed in their original form by some critics as too violent or controversial for young minds. This is a symptom of a cultural trend in the West toward coddling children, keeping them sheltered from every bad thing in the world for as long as possible. Parents, and consequently authors, illustrators and animators (out of commercial necessity) choose to eliminate those parts of a story that might cause confusion or unrest to a young child. Later versions of the Cinderella story eliminate the parts where her stepsisters cut off parts of their feet, and the end where birds peck out their eyes. Meanwhile, "The Robber Bride," which involves dead bodies and cut off fingers, has simply gone out of fashion. This is unfortunate, as the harsh consequences put to the villains in these stories are meant to teach a lesson, and leaving them out makes the story less powerful. It is also unfortunate that twentieth and twenty-first century editors, publishers, and parents have so little faith in the ability of children to emotionally handle the violence in fairy tales. Some of the retellings of fairy tales I will be discussing have returned to the harsh and violent consequences for the villains, perhaps signaling a renewed faith in the ability of their audience to handle the violence, and the usefulness of the image to the greater lesson and meaning of the story.

In addition to Disney, other strategic retellings of these tales have been undertaken by Anne Sexton (Transformations), Francesca Lia Block (The Rose and the Beast), and new stories created by J.K. Rowling (the Harry Potter series) and others, albeit with different agendas and goals. It has become popular to retell
traditional fairy tales such as those by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, and Charles Perrault, with a modern sensibility. These retellings highlight and comment upon social, political, gender and other issues in modern culture.

Francesca Lia Block and Anne Sexton both have retold fairy tales in new forms and settings to question the roles of women in modern society and to demonstrate the new possibilities open to contemporary women. New versions of these stories provide children with the opportunity to see multiple facets of the situation within a story. In its updated version, Block's Cinderella story offers women the option to repair the relationships with their sisters, valuing familial love alongside the security and love the prince offers. Fairy tale scholar Vanessa Joosen asserts, "by referring to these stories that most children are acquainted with, fairy-tale retellings can provide children and adolescents with a new perspective on a well-known narrative" (131).

Authors are also showing readers that they do not necessarily always have to follow the example of the prior generation. These authors are challenging the accepted gendered norms of behavior and asking readers to consider their own positions within the gender hierarchy in place within society.

Stories help people to understand their own positions within the world by allowing readers to identify with a character. Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, in The Uses of Enchantment (1975), points out the relevance of fairy tales for readers in working out their own traumas. Bettelheim explains that over the hundreds of years that fairy tales have been handed down, they have been constantly changing and refining so as to connect with all people, young and old. According to Bettelheim,
“Applying the psychoanalytic model of the human personality, fairy tales carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind, on whatever level each is functioning at the time” (5-6). So Bettelheim would argue that fairy tales reach parts of people, young and old, of which we are not even aware, through the use of familiar archetypes according to the psychological needs we have at the moment we connect with the story. Fairy tale retellings often take these archetypes and alter them to teach a new lesson. The examples used here teach about changing gender roles. Susan Cooper, author of The Dark is Rising series and the insightful article “Unriddling the World,” asserts that “a storyteller has to be irrational, indirect, in order to help young readers cope with this eternally puzzling world – because facts alone are not going to resolve the riddles for them” (272). How that character reacts to his or her environment serves as an example to the reader. Therefore, if older tales show for example a female constantly in a submissive role without complaint (e.g. Snow White), then a little girl who identifies with that character might think that she, too, should be submissive. If she behaves properly according to the script set out in the story, she will someday be delivered from her toil by a handsome prince on a white stallion.¹ Fairy tales help children learn how to behave in the world, and how to tell good from evil. According to Cooper, “In writing fantasy we show good, we show evil, we show the powers of each – and, I suppose,

¹ In today’s world, an example of this prince would be a tall, well muscled stock broker with a diverse portfolio and a penthouse on Wall Street. Julia Roberts’ “prince” in the movie “Pretty Woman” was in corporate acquisitions.
we show how to choose” (Cooper 275). There are many different types of retellings, to fit every conceivable purpose, from political commentary (Politically Correct Bedtime Stories by James Finn Garner) to feminist theory (The Rose and the Beast by Francesca Lia Block), to a critique of the declining morality in society today (Transformations by Anne Sexton).

When retelling a fairy tale, an author has the opportunity to raise issues and questions that were not present in the original text, or to handle them in a different way, and to capitalize on the difference. Fairy tale scholar Vanessa Joosen argues that “these ‘alternative’ adaptations provide more than a critical comment on other texts[;] many of them are also literary texts in their own right” (137). By making subtle or blatant changes to setting, narrative, and the personality of the characters, authors of retellings start with the original, but often end with something entirely different. When an author does this, the retelling takes on a life of its own, and deserves to be read as a separate work, with its own messages and implications. Many of these works have inspired criticism based solely on the work’s own literary merit and contribution. The retellings are not necessarily aimed at children or teens, either. Some authors prefer to write for an adult audience, using dry humor and graphic images not appropriate for a younger audience. The creation of books of “adult” fairy tales comes in response to a society with ever-increasing stresses. The rise in fears of war, poverty, increasing violence in the media and in their own streets is directly proportional to people’s desire to escape from such sources of anxiety. Fantasy and fairy tales offer a world of escape, where good and evil are defined and recognizable
and good almost always wins in the end. Authors have recognized the desire for escape and provided their own fairy tales complete with their own messages.

To investigate the work that fairy tales do and their significance in contemporary literary and social life, especially with regard to gender politics, I will be consulting the work of folklore and fairy tale scholars such as Jack Zipes and Vanessa Joosen, as well as cultural historian Joseph Campbell for information on the appearance and evolution of fairy tales, their definitions, and how they reflected the worlds of their creators. I will also discuss psychologist Bruno Bettelheim’s perspective on how fairy tales affect the mind and his theory that they help children to work out their problems. Finally, I will consult interviews by authors of fairy tale retellings to see what work they anticipate their tales are doing in their own words.

My focus will be primarily on retellings which empower a female heroine, with the intention of providing a more positive role model for today’s girls and women. These stories, all of them written post World War II, and many right at the millennial period of 1990 – 2000, reflect the Third Wave feminist movement. In Chapter Two: “Modern Retellings Empower Women,” I will look at the modern, empowered girls and women in several twentieth and twenty-first century works, retelling classic fairy tales, revising and updating the Grimm’s fairy tales, beginning with the character “Red” in Francesca Lia Block’s story “Wolf” and the Cinderella character in “Glass” in her collection The Rose and the Beast (2000), and continuing on to several poems in Anne Sexton’s Transformations (1971). Block’s work is aimed at a pre-teen and teenage female audience, providing alternative solutions to
the problems faced by the women in fairy tales. These retellings are intended to empower young women with choices other than the traditional roles of submissive, silent wife and mother that most of the females in the older fairy tales inhabit. Anne Sexton, on the other hand, uses fairy tales to highlight the problems she observes within American culture in the mid-twentieth century with regard to the roles and exploitation of women. In Sexton's hands, Snow White becomes a "dumb bunny" who is duped at every turn by a worldlier Queen who takes what she wants from the world, rather than submissively wishing for it. Finally, the *Harry Potter* series, while not a retelling but a modern-day fairy tale, espouses the ideal of the empowered female in the characters of Hermione, Professor McGonagall, as well as the other "good" females in the series.

Chapter Three, "Gender Roles in *Harry Potter,*" is a discussion of the *Harry Potter* series and how the ensemble cast interacts differently than one would have seen in books written when the Grimms were setting fairy tales down in print. Rowling is revising Campbell's heroic cycle by moving to a more corporate model of heroism focusing on a team rather than a single-hero narrative. The team is of mixed-gender, where the combination of stereotypically male and female traits is what makes the team effective. The genres of "boarding school novel" and "heroic narrative" are used in concert, in new ways, to exhibit changing cultural mores. Rowling highlights previously undervalued traits typically coded as feminine by showing the strengths of the female characters in her novels as different from the
strengths of the males but equal. The coming of age of the three main characters of Harry, Ron, and Hermione becomes a main theme in the novels.
Chapter Two: Modern Retellings Empower Women

Modern retellings of fairy tales can uproot the traditional roles in which the characters in each story are firmly planted, and question them, suggesting alternative outcomes for the characters, and for the stories themselves. Some of the retellings find new, socially relevant ways to encourage the teaching of modern social values such as independence and self-sufficiency in women, and emotional sensitivity in men. They provide children with characters they can relate to, using modern settings and language. For this discussion, I have selected a few modern retellings that focus on the empowerment of the female.

Fairy tales serve many functions; one is to provide behavioral models for readers. The traditional fairy tales and stories from Grimm, Perrault and Andersen provide precious few females who are strong, positive examples. Instead, submissive, voiceless females are the examples girls are given for how to deal with problems. Cinderella is the girl who married a stranger for his money in order to escape an overbearing stepmother. Snow White is the girl who runs from her overbearing mother to live with seven strangers only to be put into a coma by the overbearing mother from which she can only be revived by a rich stranger whom she immediately marries to solve her problems. Sleeping Beauty is the ultimate example of the voiceless female, who is asleep throughout the majority of the story and again marries a rich stranger at the end. The strong female characters in fairy tales tend to be the evil ones – Snow White’s evil queen, Cinderella’s evil stepmother and stepsisters, Sleeping Beauty’s witch who places the curse on her, Rapunzel’s witch who
imprisons her, Hansel and Gretel’s mother, who selfishly abandons them to starve, and the witch who wants to eat them; the stories are full of strong-willed women who get coded as “evil.” Fairy tales seem to be telling readers that if they speak up for themselves they are evil, and they can only be good by doing what they are told and never questioning authority. Girls grow up with role models who are voiceless, weak, and completely subjugated by the men in their worlds. The ultimate example of subjugation lies in Andersen’s “Tommelissa,” better known as “Thumbelina.” She is actually physically tiny. She sleeps in a walnut shell. The girl is kidnapped and forced to marry a blind mole-king. The subjugation of this beloved female heroine is so complete that she is actually created physically such that her stature reflects her inability to impact her own fate. In contrast, contemporary writers are producing female protagonists who are stronger role models.

Francesca Lia Block wrote *The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold* (2000), in which she rearranges familiar old stories, such as “Snow White” and “Cinderella” until they are only marginally recognizable, but are far more relevant to modern readers because they discuss issues such as changing family dynamics, power struggles in relationships, and abuse. Because these are retellings, Block is explicitly challenging older patriarchal ideas and norms and values in ways that might be lost if she simply created from whole cloth. Block’s target audience is adolescents, as it is with much of her other work including her popular *Weetzie Bat* series. She has taken care to incorporate issues that will strike a chord with teens. In “Wolf,” for example,
Block's version of "Little Red Riding Hood," Red is a teenage girl who has been sexually abused by her stepfather.

The Grimm version of "Little Red Cap" begins when the girl is tasked by her mother with bringing cakes and wine to her ailing grandmother. She is instructed not to wander off the path or to dawdle in any way, lest she break the wine bottle or have to walk home in the dark. Little Red Cap is completely innocent, so when she meets the wolf along the way, she does not realize she should be wary of him. She tells him where she is going and how to recognize the place, and allows him to persuade her to pick wildflowers in the woods, disobeying her mother and distracting her from tending to her grandmother, instead pursuing her own interest in enjoying a lovely stroll through the woods. Little Red Cap eventually remembers her Grandmother and goes to her with basket intact. She climbs into bed with the wolf, thinking it is her grandmother, and notices certain differences in her appearance. She notices that her grandmother’s eyes, ears, and teeth are far larger than she remembers. At this point, the wolf attacks Little Red Cap and eats her whole. She finds her grandmother also in the wolf’s stomach. The ladies are eventually freed by a passing woodcutter who stops in to check on Grandma, sees the wolf asleep with his swollen belly, and cuts Little Red Cap and her grandmother out of it. He kills the wolf (who strangely is not killed by having his stomach slit open) and Little Red Cap returns home safely, but no longer innocent of the dangers a wolf can present. On her next trip to Grandma’s another wolf tries to fool her, and this time Little Red Cap gives him roundabout directions and beats him to Grandma’s house, where she and Grandma devise a
scheme to drown the wolf in Grandma’s sausage-water. The phallic symbol of the sausage brings to mind the provocative nature of the wolf. The phallic sausages are cooked, and the wolf is killed by the water that cooked them. Another way to view this image is to say that the fact that the sausages are still a representation of the male may also remind the reader that the women needed a man to demonstrate killing the wolf first, before they could do it themselves, and in fact even needed the help of sausage-water, coded as male by its association with sausages, in order to complete the task.

In “Wolf” Block alters the Grimm formula with a tough, shotgun wielding Granny holding the wolf, in this case Red’s abusive stepdad (who has guessed Red’s destination, and beaten her there), at gunpoint. Red grabs the gun, shooting and killing the stepdad, but Granny insists it was her, for Red’s benefit. Red knows differently, but appreciates Granny’s effort to spare her the emotional turmoil she would have after killing a person, as well as sparing her a possible conviction and prison time. “My grandma says that she did it. She says that he came at us and she said to him, I’ve killed a lot prettier, sweeter innocents than you with this shotgun, meaning the animals when she used to go out hunting, which is a pretty good line and everything, but she didn’t do it. It was me. ... I have no regrets about him” (128). In this story, these women do not need a woodcutter to show them how to kill a wolf. In fact, Granny has already had experience with killing other animals. For Red, though, killing seems to be an instinctual act of self-preservation. In Block’s hands, Red Riding Hood becomes not a cautionary tale meant to correct errant children, but a
story that grants abuse victims license to defend themselves. In Block's world 
women are no longer passive victims but active agents who can support and save one 
another. Red saves Granny (by killing the stepdad) but then Granny saves Red from 
prison.

Block illustrates not only self-sufficient women, but in another story, women 
who no longer compete with one another, and who help to support one another when 
needed. Grandma supports Red's actions here by trying to take the blame for the 
murder that Red committed. She understands that in this case it was kill or be killed, 
and she encouraged her granddaughter to be strong and defend herself instead of 
being consumed by the Wolf, as Red and Granny are in the original tale. At the end 
of the Grimms' version, Red and Grandma do act together to drown the second wolf, 
which is a rare example of female power which is not coded as "evil" in Grimm, but 
these females can only have this power after having been consumed by the evil wolf 
and rescued by the wood-cutter, who demonstrates for the women the wolf's 
mortality by killing the first wolf. In Block's version, Red is consumed by the wolf, 
sexually, but then is able to find her own way out of the situation, first by running to 
Granny's for help, then by killing the wolf herself. In the end, Red did not need help 
to face her aggressor. Granny's act of taking responsibility for the killing grants Red 
license and forgiveness for her act of self-preservation.

Not all of the stories in The Rose and the Beast are as dark as "Wolf." 
According to critic David Russell, in his article about Block's book: "The old tale of 
Cinderella becomes in Block's hands a story of sisterly love, loyalty, and sacrifice"
(Russell 111). The Grimm’s version of Cinderella is slightly different from the more modern versions of the story with which most people are familiar. Cinderella is a good girl, and the daughter of a rich man and his first wife. When the wife dies, the man remarries, and the new wife and stepdaughters get preferential treatment while Cinderella is forced into servitude. In the Grimm’s version, Cinderella plants a hazel tree at her mother’s grave, and the birds in the tree grant her wishes. The birds also aid her in the impossible tasks the stepmother assigns her as a condition for permission to attend the festival at the palace. Unlike the Disney film, which is based on Perrault’s version of the story, Cinderella is not imprisoned, so when the stepmother and stepsisters leave for the ball, Cinderella is able to go out to the hazel tree and say, “Silver and gold throw down over me” (Stern 124). The birds pass a dress and shoes down to Cinderella – different ones for each of the three days. The prince is entranced by the lovely Cinderella and dances only with her each night, and each night tries to follow her home, but she gets away from him. On the third night Cinderella is given the finest of dresses, and gold, not glass, slippers. The prince, not wanting to lose track of his beautiful mystery girl on this last night, has the steps coated with pitch, so that when she runs away at the end of the night one of the slippers sticks to the stair.

The prince goes to Cinderella’s home, where he had followed her to the previous two evenings, and states that the one who fits the shoe will be his bride. When the stepsisters try the shoe, each is too big to fit it, and each, in turn, is instructed by their mother to cut off the offending part of the foot. Twice the prince
rides off with a stepsister, who has forced her foot into the slipper, and each time, as they pass the first wife’s grave, a bird in the hazel tree tips off the prince to the blood running out of the shoe. Twice the prince turns back to the house, returning the false bride. When he asks if there are any other maidens, at first he is told no, then the father says there is a stunted kitchen wench left behind by his first wife, but that the prince’s maiden could not possibly be her. The prince insists on having Cinderella brought up to try the shoe, instantly recognizes her, the shoe fits, and they ride off together. At the wedding the stepsisters’ eyes are pecked out by the birds as punishment. In contrast to the behavior of her loud and spoiled stepsisters, Cinderella is celebrated for being quiet and submissive.

In Block’s retelling, “Glass,” Cinderella does not have gold shoes or a hazel tree. Instead, it is her stories that captivate others with their creative power. Her fairy godmother encourages her to share her gift with the world, enabling Cinderella to meet the prince. Just as in “Wolf,” Block emphasizes another mentoring relationship between an older woman and a younger one. Block also includes a representation of how female peers can undercut one another. Cinderella’s sisters become envious, and hurl insults at her, causing her to lose her confidence. This sends Cinderella running back home, not wanting to damage her relationship with her sisters.

She felt their envy and this broke her. The story ended, she couldn’t tell the rest, they’d hate her, she had to stop it, she wasn’t any good shut up you bad bad girl ugly and you don’t deserve any of this and so the spell was broken and she ran home through a tangle of words
where the letters jumbled and made no sense and meant nothing, and
the words were ugly and she was not to be heard or seen, she was
blemished and too fat, too thin, not smart, too smart, not good, not a
storyteller, not a creator, not beautiful, not a woman not not not (65-
66).

Here, the things the sisters say to Cinderella recall the attitudes of the “evil
stepsisters” of Grimm’s version. They are so jealous of their sister’s talents they say
terrible things to make her insecure. This behavior reflects the strong competition that
has always existed between women around the world, but particularly in western
cultures – especially women trying to raise their social status – to marry well.
Cinderella’s sisters want a chance with the prince, and do not want to compete with
Cinderella, so they chase her away.

Following this breakdown and her return home, Cinderella assures her sisters
she still values their companionship and respect over that of the prince, and they in
turn see that the prince makes Cinderella happy, and do not get in the way when the
prince comes back for her.

When the sisters saw him kneeling before her holding the one shoe,
not breathing, trying not to crush anything, saw how he looked at her,
how he needed her, they knew that if they tried to take this from her
they would never know, have nothing left, they would starve, they
would break, they would never wake up (69-70).
In the end Cinderella is able to make peace with her sisters, allowing her to find happiness without sacrificing her relationships with other women in the process. Block eschews the rescue fantasy, instead endorsing female solidarity and producing an empowerment fantasy, much like the powerful ending of "Wolf." Cinderella chooses to go with the prince only once she knows she will not lose her sisters in the process, privileging sisterly affection over romantic love.

With these two examples it is evident that Block is presenting alternative choices for her readers. Fairy tale scholar Vanessa Joosen, in her article "Fairy-tale Retellings between Art and Pedagogy," asserts: "Fairy-tale retellings try to make children and adolescents who make the connection with the original tale aware of issues and possible interpretations in these texts which they had not noticed before" (131). By placing the characters in a modern setting, authors render these protagonists more accessible to the modern reader; the characters may also be wrestling with exactly the same problems as some of their readers, such as the sexual abuse discussed in Block's "Wolf." By using an old story line, rather than telling a new story, Block draws a parallel between the old and the new, showing how different interpretations can yield new meanings from these familiar tales. The readers can then have the old story in mind and see how the roles of the characters in the retellings have changed to empower female characters. The old story is necessary for the comparison, and to really see the work that Block is doing. In the case of many of Block's characters, different choices can help a character to take control of her life,
rather than leaving that control with the man, a less than ideal parent, or some other outside influence.

Block’s work is psychologically motivated; it works at changing the previously formed gender roles resident within the subconscious. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim presents a compelling argument for the use of fairy tales in psychotherapy for troubled children in his book, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. Bettelheim argues that applying Freudian psychology to fairy tales shows how children relate in a deep way to the characters in fairy tales. A child might have an affinity for one story over another, depending on that child’s psychological issues. A detailed explanation of the psychological implications of several fairy tales is included in the second part of his book. In his analysis of “Little Red Riding Hood,” Bettelheim explains that this story is intended to relate to children who have not resolved their Oedipal conflicts. According to Bettelheim, the attraction of Red to the wolf is due to her overactive id, which makes her want to only serve her own selfish desires. Jumping into bed with the wolf (disguised as Granny) completes her Oedipal fantasy, until the wolf eats her. In the Grimms’ version of this tale, Granny and Red are rescued, and when Red encounters another wolf, she knows better and runs straight to Granny’s, where they work together to bring down the wolf. According to Bettelheim, this signifies Red having gotten over her Oedipal conflict, and now being able to follow the path of virtue without straying to follow her own desires (166-83).
Critic Sheldon Cashdan, in a more recent work, *The Witch Must Die*, takes on Bettelheim's theories: "While no one will deny that children are sexual beings, and that some fairy tales may tap sexual longings, sex is far from the most pressing concern in the lives of the very young" (12). In his book, Cashdan prefers to examine the traits fairy tales embody, focusing on the "deadly sins," and how they are reflected in fairy tales. For instance, Cashdan examines the ways in which "Cinderella" is about envy, and the lesson one is supposed to learn by reading the story.

As evidenced by their repeated appearance in western literature, and use by Bettelheim and Cashdan, there can be no argument that fairy tales are instructive for children. If Bettelheim is to be believed, then perhaps Block's "Wolf" no longer carries an Oedipal message, and therefore can work on a different part of a child’s psyche, instead changing the ingrained patriarchal gender roles to a more independent, empowered state. For Cashdan, fairy tales appear to be cautionary tales. If so, perhaps Block's "Glass" cautions against the burning of bridges, and instead urges the gathering about us of as many loving souls as possible, for mutual support.

While Block's *The Rose and the Beast* is still aimed primarily at a young adult audience, some authors choose to use fairy tale retellings to engage more adult subject matter. Anne Sexton's *Transformations* (1971) is a book of fairy tales retold in poetry. Sexton was a member of the "confessional" school of poetry, which includes Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell. She published several books of very personal autobiographical poetry before publishing *Transformations*. In
Transformations, Sexton delves deeper into the psychological and sociological implications of fairy tales. Instead of placing the characters in an alternate setting, she simply brings the reader out of the older context using modern references and images. While Block creates a world in which the new version of the story can take place, enabling possibilities the characters would not have had in the original, Sexton’s characters are still in their original settings and storylines, with modern references meant for the reader’s consideration, giving a new possible interpretation of the existing story, and commentary on the original. As an introduction to each story, Sexton sets the tone with an opening stanza that affixes the twentieth-century lens through which the reader is meant to view the story. In Transformations, Sexton uses unrestrained, often graphic imagery to present her own, adult readings of the old stories. Sexton’s introduction to the book is a poem in which she states that she is speaking as an old woman to a group of older people, and reminds them of when they were read to as children. She describes a teenage boy as “sixteen and he wants some answers” (2). He finds a key and has great expectations for what it will unlock. It unlocks Sexton’s book, which could mean that in transforming these stories, Sexton is unlocking “the answers” for readers.

According to critic Tom Shippey, “Sexton’s poems further introduced darker thoughts about the psychic origins of fairy tale” (260). Sexton explores the darker side of themes residing under the surface of fairy tales, and suggests themes that might not have occurred to readers before. In his essay “Rewriting the Core: Transformations of the Fairy Tale in Contemporary Writing,” Shippey goes on to
discuss Sexton's version of "Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)" he explains in detail how Sexton strongly implies that Sleeping Beauty has been sexually abused. Anne Sexton and Francesca Lia Block share this focus on abuse. Perhaps their emphasis on the sexual victimization of women stands in for the ways in which these writers see women as being victimized by the patriarchy through fairy tales featuring submissive heroines. Sexton's poems unlock alternative interpretations of the stories and then apply these to the real world by framing the story with a modern reference or anecdote.

The Grimms' version of Sleeping Beauty is called "Little Briar-Rose," and begins with a childless king and queen who are desperate for offspring. One day a frog comes to the queen and tells her she will have a lovely daughter. The King orders a feast once the child comes, and invites twelve of the thirteen wise women in the kingdom, because he has only twelve golden plates for them to eat from. All of the wise women bestow gifts upon the girl, such as beauty, riches, virtue, and so on. The thirteenth wise woman breaks into the party just as the eleventh wise woman is bestowing her gift. Out of revenge for not being invited to the party, the thirteenth wise woman curses the baby, saying that in her fifteenth year she will prick her finger on a spindle and die. The twelfth wise woman does not have the power to override this curse, but softens it. Instead, the child will fall into a deep sleep lasting a hundred years. On the girl's fifteenth birthday, she is left alone for a few hours and explores areas of the castle she has not yet seen. In a high tower she finds a woman spinning, is curious, and picks up the spindle to examine it. She immediately pricks her finger.
Despite her father's best efforts to avoid it, the curse comes to fruition and the whole kingdom is plunged into a deep sleep. A giant hedge with roses and thorns grows up around the kingdom so high and thick it is impenetrable. Legend of the sleeping princess circulates, and many young men die trying to get through the hedge. As it happens, on the very day the hundred years is passed and the curse is to be lifted, a young man decides to try his luck with the hedge. It parts for him easily, and grows back together behind him. He explores the sleeping kingdom and finds the princess. He is taken by her beauty and kisses her. She wakes, along with the rest of the court, and the couple marries and lives happily ever after.

In Sexton's version, the tale becomes that of a daughter who is sexually abused by her father. Being pricked by a phallic object like a spindle at the age of fifteen, as in Grimm, does hint at the fear of sexual experience, and the father is the one who orders the spindles all burned, therefore protecting his daughter from that danger. The leap from this connection to the idea that the father wants to keep the beautiful girl all for himself is not a great one; however Sexton's relation of this tale seems to take the idea a step farther, as if she is working out her own experience with abuse by relating to this tale. Sexton's introduction to this fairy tale seems to invoke hypnotism and psychoanalysis:

She is swimming further and further back,

up like a salmon,

struggling into her mother's pocketbook.

Little doll child,
come here to Papa.
Sit on my knee.
I have kisses for the back of your neck.
A penny for your thoughts, Princess.
I will hunt them like an emerald.
Come be my snooky
and I will give you a root (Sexton 107).

Here, the speaker struggles to get back into “her mother’s pocketbook,” which seems to symbolize a desire to return to the womb – to escape from this existence. Later, the child is beckoned to papa’s knee, then “I have kisses for the back of your neck.” A kiss on the back of the neck could be an innocent act, but can also be very sensual. Given the earlier indication that the child wants to return to the womb, it can be inferred that this act is uncomfortable and inappropriate to the child. Next, the father offers the child a “root.” The phallic shape of a root recalls the deadly spindles from “Sleeping Beauty,” and the sausages from Granny’s sausage-water. At this point things take a very sinister turn, with the phallic imagery here signaling the complete male dominance implicit in the father-daughter relationship.

After the prince and princess are married, Briar Rose is afraid to sleep and must be drugged in order to sleep. She has nightmares about the party where the curse was laid upon her. The end of the poem reinforces the image of abuse and the idea that the speaker is working out her own personal problems, invoking a range of emotions in the reader from disgust and fear to compassion for the victim.
Each night I am nailed into place
and I forget who I am.

Daddy?

That’s another kind of prison.

It’s not the prince at all,

but my father

drunkenly bent over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,

my father thick upon me

like some sleeping jellyfish.

What voyage this, little girl?

This coming out of prison?

God help –

this life after death? (Sexton 112)

In this passage Sexton takes a passive tone implying that things are being done to the speaker. “Each night I am nailed into place.” The “Daddy” character is referred to as if he is a kind of prison. This speaker clearly feels very repressed and forced into a situation with which she is very uncomfortable. The father is compared to a shark and a jellyfish, while the speaker calls herself a salmon earlier. Sharks and jellyfish eat salmon. The speaker feels she is about to be consumed by a predator. In the last stanza, the speaker says she is “coming out of prison,” but seems unsure if it is a good
or bad thing, with the line “God help—” she seems to be signaling a feeling of helplessness, despite her rescue. In her nightmares about the abuse, she is reliving it nightly, despite having been rescued from the situation. She seems to be considering whether remaining in her slumber would have been better.

This use of fairy tales by Sexton to work out her own personal traumas calls to mind Bruno Bettelheim’s work in this area, the difference being that Bettelheim worked with children, and Sexton is making these associations as an adult. Perhaps Sexton demonstrates here that fairy tales can be used, even by adults, to delve into their own psyches to heal traumas from their youth.

Sexton’s version of Snow White is less personal, but deals instead with contemporary ideals of female empowerment and rejection of the subjugation of women by projecting them on to this story, thereby drawing interesting comparisons. The Grimm’s version of “Little Snow White” establishes the generally accepted tale. The Queen bears a lovely child called Snow White, and then dies. The king takes another wife, who is beautiful and proud, and has the magical looking-glass that tells her she is the most beautiful woman in the kingdom. The Queen becomes enraged when Snow White surpasses her in beauty, and she orders a huntsman to take Snow White into the woods and kill her, bringing her lung and liver back in a box to prove he has done his job. The huntsman let her go instead, and he brings the lung and liver of a boar to the Queen instead. The Queen eats these, thinking she is devouring the organs of her step daughter. Snow White ends up living with the seven dwarfs and keeping their house. When the wicked Queen asks her mirror who is fairest in the
land, thinking Snow White dead, she is surprised to find out the girl is very much alive and well and living with the dwarfs. So the Queen disguises herself three times to trick Snow White into buying one of her poisoned goods. After one bite of a poisoned apple, she dies. The mirror once again declares the wicked Queen the fairest in the land.

The Dwarfs lay her out and weep over her for three days, then place her in a glass coffin made with her name and station as princess on it in gold letters. Eventually, a king’s son comes into the forest and sees Snow White on the mountain and reads the inscription on her coffin. He says he can not live without seeing Snow White and the dwarfs give the coffin to the Prince. As the coffin was being carried off by the prince’s servants she comes back to life and climbs out of the coffin. The prince explains to her what happened, that he loves her and asks her to be his wife.

They are married at the palace, but the evil Queen is invited to the feast. As she is getting ready to go, she consults her looking glass, and is told that the young Queen is fairer than she. She is enraged, but goes to the feast to see the young Queen. She recognizes Snow White just as red – hot iron shoes are placed before her. She is forced to wear the shoes and dance until she drops dead.

Two powerful women cannot share the same stage, which explains the Queen’s jealousy. The Queen cannot seem to help herself when she is in a fit of jealous rage. In this story, the Grimms establish the Queen as an ambitious woman who not only wishes to destroy her competition, but to consume it. This Queen is an example of what might have become of one of Cinderella’s step sisters had she
married the prince instead. There is also a strange parallel here between this Queen's burned feet, and the feet of Cinderella's stepsisters that were cut to fit into the gold shoe. The huntsman and the dwarfs, as well as the prince are all rescuers, saving the women in these stories from fully indulging in their carnal desires.

Sexton's "Snow White" contains references to the old Grimm's tale, while also bringing in more modern allusions from popular culture, with lines such as "she opened her eyes as wide as Orphan Annie" and "Snow White, the dumb bunny" (Sexton 8). Introducing these elements, from a comic strip and Disney, calls attention to the shallow interpretation of the characters in the animated movies and illustrated children's books, and the passivity and vacantness of that character.

The introduction for Sexton's version of "Snow White" is a prime example: "You always read about it: / the plumber with twelve children / who wins the Irish Sweepstakes. / From toilets to riches. / That story" (53). Sexton takes references from her contemporary world to create similes in these poems that both delight and horrify the reader as she compares these imaginary characters to the most unusual things, which, however strange, always seem to fit just right the image. A passage from "Cinderella" illustrates this: "Cinderella was their maid. / She slept on the sooty hearth each night / and walked around looking like Al Jolson" (Sexton 54). The comparison first seems out of place, but upon consideration seems to fit perfectly, while it also implies the repressed status of Cinderella by comparing her with another individual who would have had limited rights. Al Jolsen, parodying a black man in the pre-Civil Rights era, brings to mind the ideas of repression, slavery, and the
subjugation of the black race, as the black-face actors typically portrayed black men as stupid and childish. Sexton draws a comparison here between the situations of blacks and women. Images of blackface as a mask come to mind here, suggesting a split between the outer face put on by the character and her inner turmoil, giving more depth to Cinderella than Disney would allow. *Transformations* was published in 1971, at a time when equal rights for women was a hot political topic of the day. It is not surprising that Sexton would inject images of racial repression into a story about female repression, drawing a comparison between the two.

Examination of the “original” tales sets up a baseline for how fairy tales are interpreted and received by their audience. The ways in which we think about the older stories, as metaphors and as teaching tools establishes a precedent that contemporary authors can build upon. We can then take that model and apply it to the newer tales, making a comparison between the original and the newer version. For example, instead of Red and Granny being eaten by the wolf who shows up at Granny’s house, Francesca Lia Block’s version of the story shows two strong-willed women who do not need to be taught a lesson by the wolf before they take matters into their own hands, killing the wolf. Block has transformed the story from one meant to teach girls to stay on the path of virtue, into one about the ability of women to handle their own problems, with no need of rescue. Anne Sexton provides a view of Grimm’s fairy tales in their original forms, but through a modern / postmodern lens, creating new meaning from familiar stories by drawing unexpected associations.
Chapter Three:

Gender Roles in *Harry Potter*

A testament to the continued popularity of the fantasy genre is the constant appearance of new stories. These follow the formula of the traditional tale, the heroic cycle, as conceptualized by Joseph Campbell. This character must progress through a series of trials, often with the help of some other greater power, and generally along with some mystical element. In the end, the character learns some moral lesson which helps him/her to prevail. Campbell posited that there are no new stories, and that all stories continually reinvent the same patterns. What makes fairy tale retellings and new, contemporary stories interesting is the difference in how this pattern is implemented. In the *Harry Potter* series of novels, J.K. Rowling has managed to reflect stylistically the contemporary young adult literature genre, while retaining some of the formulae that Campbell identified.

Rather than retell the same old stories, these new stories still echo their forbears, but with modern twists. According to Kate Behr, in her article “‘Same-as-Difference’: Narrative Transformations and Intersecting Cultures in Harry Potter,” modern tales can take an existing pattern or idea and transform its meaning to suit the author’s purpose:

- narrative transformations do not so much change the desires or the facts as the participants’ perceptions of relationships and their dynamics. Thus the plot (to borrow the Formalist distinction) remains the same but the narrative, the connecting flow, and thus the story
presented to the reader/auditor is changed (usually for therapeutic effect) (113).

What Behr is saying here is that by using a familiar format but injecting into the existing plot new themes, such as alternative gender roles, the meaning of a familiar story can be changed entirely. Modern stories such as *Harry Potter* therefore play on existing story arcs, using archetypes that have existed for centuries, and a pattern in the plot (the heroic cycle) that gives the stories a feeling of familiarity while still telling a new story. Modern elements paired with the traditional heroic cycle format can be a powerful way to represent or highlight certain points.

J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series is a prime example of the modern-day take on the heroic cycle. In this series, Rowling takes the idea of the Campbell’s heroic cycle and incorporates modern ideals such as teamwork (instead of reliance on a single hero), female empowerment and equality, and the desires of children to be treated with respect and dignity. Rowling has taken care, in this series, to include characters of different races and socioeconomic classes, as well as strong female characters, and these modern twists, combined with elements of an old “boarding school novel,”

are what make this series uniquely appealing to a modern audience. One character in particular, Harry’s friend Hermione Granger, stands out as an

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2 The genre of the “Boarding School Novel” flourished between roughly the nineteenth century and the Second World War and focused on the trials of adolescents and pre-adolescents in the boarding school environment. Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* are two examples of such stories.
example of the new, empowered female in modern fantasy fiction. *Harry Potter* is indeed rehearsing old ideas as part of the Campbell hero cycle; what the critics fail to notice is that Rowling is doing this self-consciously in order to enact repetition with a difference. Her heroine does not need to usurp all traditional male characteristics to be heroic; instead, by depicting Hermione with a mix of male and female skills, Rowling does something ultimately more interesting by validating those skills traditionally recognized and then dismissed and marginalized as belonging to the sphere of women. By demonstrating the importance of typically female traits, Rowling joins Sexton and Block in empowering the female characters in her story.

The relationships between Ron, Harry and Hermione in the books highlight the fundamental differences between boys and girls without marginalizing the female. In the *Harry Potter* world, the boys want action and adventure, whereas women (as embodied by Hermione) are more thoughtful and understand emotions that drive behavior, which enables them to have insights about people the boys cannot yet grasp. Nicholas Tucker, in his article “The Rise and Rise of Harry Potter,” seems to make a negative statement regarding the characterization of these relationships: “Gender roles are stereotyped, with boys out for action and the one salient girl character forever urging caution” (228-9). While Hermione Granger does exemplify some stereotypes of girls, she also embodies some characteristics traditionally associated with men, such as a high level of intelligence, and ambition. I would argue that the existence of this binary creates a balance that ultimately helps Hermione, Ron
and Harry to deal with the variety of conflicts with which they are confronted throughout their time at Hogwart’s.

Jack Zipes has written a short chapter in his book *Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter*, on the success of the Harry Potter series, and his troubles with this phenomenon. According to Zipes, the Harry Potter novels “were formulaic and sexist” (171). His essay, “The Phenomenon of Harry Potter, or Why All the Talk?” enumerates the ways in which he was nonplussed by the books, and thinks they serve to “homogenize” our children (188). Zipes argues that “Girls, when they are not downright silly or unlikable, are helpers, enablers and instruments. No girl is brilliantly heroic the way Harry is, no woman experienced and wise like Professor Dumbledore” (179). I would argue against Zipes’ claims, citing Hermione’s clear-headedness in the face of danger that allows her to solve the riddle at the end of the first book. This is the first of many examples of Hermione’s ability to think her way through the trouble at hand, while the boys attempt to use force. This suggests the validation of a different paradigm or model of heroism. Perhaps Rowling is following a stereotype, but she seems to be trying to change how readers value those stereotypical skills. Hermione’s obsessive study of the wizarding world and practice of spell casting enables her to produce knowledge and magical ability beyond a typical student at her level. Her skill at research enables her to find information about horcruxes that is essential to the success the trio achieves by the end of the last book. Both strategies are needed at different times, presenting a balance in ability and
importance. It is this ability in Hermione that makes her so valuable within the trio of friends, and it is this ability that would rarely have been granted to a female in a story written even fifty years ago. In other areas, Hermione embodies traditionally female skills to build power within this series’ contemporary cultural emphasis on teamwork. As for a woman who is experienced and wise like Dumbledore, Hermione has not yet lived long enough to achieve that status, but Minerva McGonagall comes close. Dumbledore is lauded as extraordinary in his magical abilities, and has lived a very long time to build up a wealth of experience from which he draws his wisdom. We also gain insight into his less than perfect boyhood in later novels, as well as the source of much of his wisdom in the form of a magical device that holds memories for him, called a “Pensieve,” that allows him to sift through his thoughts. McGonagall is a bit younger, but still proves her adeptness with magic and with wisdom throughout the series in her positions as professor, head of house Gryffindor, and headmistress while Dumbledore is away.

Unlike other fantasy figures, such as the D.C. and Marvel Comics heroes of the post-World War Two era and the even older giant-killers and dragon slayers of fairy tales and fantasies, the Harry Potter series emphasizes the value of teamwork and distributes heroism among a group rather than locating it in the single body of a hero. Those heroes were products of their time and reflected the cultural mores (submissive women) or perceived needs (hero worship) of their readership. While the novels center around the story of Harry Potter, “the boy who lived,” they have an ensemble cast of children who are all ordinary (for the Wizarding world), but who
achieve extraordinary feats when they learn to work together. Harry’s only special power is that of his mother’s love for him, which saved him from Voldemort’s killing curse when he was a baby. Harry seems just like any other kid one might run into today. He is average looking, with messy hair and broken glasses. He is bright, but no genius, and has poor study habits. He breaks rules and receives punishments just like other children, in both the Muggle and Wizarding worlds. He has certain talents that contribute greatly to the success of the group, but it is only with the talents of each individual character, combined together, and those characters’ devotion to the greater good, that they are able to overcome the evil force they are fighting. In an interview at the Edinburgh Book Festival in 2004 Rowling explained that the three heroes combined are a reflection of her at their age. “I did not set out to make Hermione like me but she is a bit like me. She is an exaggeration of how I was when I was younger. Harry is a bit like me. I find them quite easy to write, and I think that that is because they are a bit like different parts of my personality” (“J.K. Rowling at the Edinburgh Book Festival” 2004).

Kathleen Sweeny gives an overview of modern, strong female heroes in movies, including a section on Hermione in her article titled “SUPERNATURAL GIRLS” in Afterimage. The article discusses a trend of female heroes appearing in recent years, citing “the Post 1990s generation of animated and special effects heroines are often responsible not just for protecting themselves, but also for saving others, and sometimes the entire universe” (Sweeny). While this article focuses on the cinematic version of the Harry Potter stories, the movies all remain remarkably true to
their respective books, making Sweeny’s point here relevant to a discussion about the books. With reference to Hermione’s relationship with Harry Potter, Sweeny states “Harry not only encourages Hermione’s role in the acquisition of power – he depends on her” (Sweeny). Finally, Sweeny attributes the popularity of the series of books and movies to Hermione’s presence: “without Hermione, it is doubtful this generation of viewers would have catapulted the series to such levels of success” (Sweeny).

Perhaps it is because of Hermione’s existence as a positive role model for girls that the series has attracted so many followers. The fact that Hermione has both narrative importance and commercial importance may have been integral to the success of the whole Harry Potter franchise, in the sense that the character of Hermione Granger appeals to a demographic of girls who might have passed up the series as “fantasy for boys” otherwise.

Unlike women in Grimms’ fairy tales, who are largely silent and inactive if they are not protagonists, Hermione Granger is quite talkative and opinionated, and also a very capable witch in her own right. By making one of her heroes female Rowling appeals to the desire in today’s culture to teach equality among the sexes. Hermione is a fellow classmate of Harry’s, and it is only with Hermione’s help that Harry can succeed in each of the books in this series.

Additionally, it is only with Hermione’s help that Harry and Ron can pass each grade in school, since she is smarter and more studious than they are, and they constantly go to her for help with their studies, beginning in the very first book. “She had started drawing up study schedules and color-coding all her notes. Harry and Ron
wouldn’t have minded, but she kept nagging them to do the same” (*Sorcerer’s Stone* 283-4). Rowling’s choice of the word “nagging” here invokes the scenario of the nagging woman and henpecked man, setting up Hermione as the stereotypical woman. What makes this interesting is that Rowling seems to intentionally stereotype Hermione, not to portray her as weak and ineffectual as might be expected, but instead to then demonstrate how these typically female qualities are useful and valuable, thus uplifting and empowering femininity. Throughout the series, Hermione never lets up the pressure on the boys to tend to their studies, as seen in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* as Hermione and Harry discuss a dream he has had:

“"You’re supposed to be learning to close your mind to this sort of thing,” said Hermione, suddenly stern.

“I know I am,” said Harry. “But—”

“Well, I think we should just try and forget what you saw,” said Hermione firmly. And you ought to put in a bit more effort on your Occlumency from now on” (589).

As demonstrated in this example, Hermione has a clear vision of the consequences of not studying, whether it is for academic purposes, as in the prior example from *Sorcerer’s Stone*, or for defensive purposes, as Harry’s Occlumency lessons were in *Phoenix*. As Kate Behr explains it:

Hermione is established as an authority, not just on magic, and facts, but also on people and relationships … She consistently modifies the reader’s perceptions of people and things, acting as the rational,
balanced voice opposing Harry’s anger, suggesting alternative understandings of people, relationships and facts (117-118).

In her role as the stereotypical female, Hermione understands personal relationships when the boys are incapable, which proves to be a very valuable skill as situations and relationships become more and more complex in subsequent installments of the series. Instead of making Hermione a vigilant, muscle-bound martial arts hero and masculinizing her, perhaps Rawling is trying to create a setting in which skills such as emotion, work, and academics, traditionally associated with women, are validated and valuable to the success of the characters’ enterprises.

In *Phoenix*, Hermione explains to Harry why Cho Chang is so upset all the time this year:

“Well, obviously she’s feeling very sad, because of Cedric dying. ... And she probably can’t work out what her feelings toward Harry are anyway, because he was the one who was with Cedric when Cedric died, so that’s all very mixed up and painful. Oh, and she’s afraid she’s going to be thrown off the Ravenclaw Quidditch team because she’s been flying so badly.” (459).

Here, Hermione reveals to the boys the complexity of the female mind, something that they had not realized before. This passage shows Hermione’s growing maturity and Ron and Harry’s lack of the same. Hermione tries, at several points as the trio comes of age, to explain emotional and intellectual actions of females and interactions between males and females to Ron and Harry, with little success. Without
her help in this realm, the boys might have missed several important facts and clues along the way in several of the books. As the characters progress through the fight against Voldemort, they also progress through growing up and learning about interacting as young adults in the world, instead of as children.

Hermione is a prime example of the modern fairy tale's change from old to new values. She is strong, independent, and equal in ability level to her male counterparts; though her talents may differ, she still has all the normal teenage insecurities about her looks, her reputation as teacher's pet, and her fear of failure, and she can have a temper at times, but she does not let these human limitations stop her from succeeding. These qualities in Hermione seem to be examples with which young female readers can identify. Her Muggle heritage could have been a roadblock to her success. Instead it has motivated her to succeed. Without a pure blooded family heritage to back her up, Hermione had to work hard to prove that she belonged among the population of witches and wizards at Hogwarts, and that insecurity served her well in her first years at Hogwarts. Her position as underdog and her inner struggles were big motivators for her. Rowling seems to be trying to model for girls how to make their own insecurities work for them. In *Sorcerer's Stone*, at the start of their first Potions class at Hogwarts, Snape tells the class, "I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death - if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach." … "Hermione Granger was on the edge of her seat and looked desperate to start proving that she wasn't a dunderhead" (170). Hermione's desperation to succeed is a signal of her drive and she has identified academic
excellence as the pathway to that success. Her academic ambition not only helps her to excel at school, but also aids invaluably in the trio’s mystery-solving efforts. Hermione is the one who can research anything and find the answers the team needs to move on with their quest. She also can often identify rare items or spells that will have escaped Harry or Ron’s notice, since they do not have the knowledge base that Hermione does.

As an example for modern young readers, Hermione stands in contrast to the marginalized female characters in older tales, such as Snow White, who has to run away and seek the aid of a group of dwarfs, Cinderella, who has to run away with a stranger before she can stand up to her stepmother, and Sleeping Beauty, who stumbles upon her fate while doing some unauthorized snooping, sleeps through the middle of the story, then marries a complete stranger upon waking. Hermione never runs from adversity, never hides behind one of her male partners, and definitely seeks out her own destiny with purpose; nothing is accidental where she is concerned.

In the world of Harry Potter there are many instances, throughout the series, where female characters are integral to the plot and necessary to the survival of Harry Potter, and of the world. Female characters are major allies as well as villains in the series. Minerva McGonagall is Transfigurations professor, head of house Gryffindor, and headmistress in place of Dumbledore when he is away. Her first name signifies her status: she is Minerva, Roman goddess of wisdom and war. She is strong and brave; willing and capable to fight if needed, but even-tempered and able to reason out any situation so as to take the most prudent action. In a scene in *Harry Potter and*
*the Order of the Phoenix*, the "high inquisitor," Dolores Umbridge, power-hungry and sadistic representative from the Ministry of Magic, who looks for reasons to wield her extensive power everywhere, has come to inspect Professor McGonagall's teaching in a Transfigurations class. She has attempted to intimidate McGonagall at the beginning of the class, but McGonagall, strong and unwavering, will have none of it: "'I wonder,' said Professor McGonagall in cold fury, turning on Professor Umbridge, 'how you expect to gain an idea of my usual teaching methods if you continue to interrupt me? You see, I do not generally permit people to talk when I am talking'" (320). Here, Professor McGonagall might have given in to Umbridge's attempts to intimidate and take over the class, or she might have exploded in a rage at Umbridge's attempt. However neither action would have achieved the desired result, which was to shame Umbridge into silence. Instead, McGonagall took a moment to collect herself and calmly chose just the right turn of phrase to show the other woman that she will not be intimidated, and that when she is running a class, no one will disrupt her classroom, not even "the high inquisitor." To be sure, Professor Umbridge exacts her revenge on McGonagall later in the story, quite brutally, but even then McGonagall will not be beaten. After taking four stuns in the chest, McGonagall proves her physical toughness, and appears by the end of the book recovered and still very much herself.

Dolores Umbridge is also a force to be reckoned with. She wields her power at Hogwarts in *Order of the Phoenix* as heavily and as often as possible, making rule after rule in an attempt to assure her stability in the position as headmaster. She is
portrayed, however, as highly feminine in outward appearance, with portraits of kittens on her office walls, and with fuzzy sweaters, fussy blouses, and ribbons ever-present on her person. The saccharine-sweetness of her voice and appearance stand in direct opposition to her cruelty, as evidenced by the punishment she gave to Harry when she accused him of lying. She forced him to write out lines with a magical quill that cut whatever he wrote into the back of his hand. Umbridge is also a lackey to Minister of Magic Fudge. She kowtows to him at every opportunity. It is possible that Rowling, through Umbridge, is showing how this type of stereotypical femininity is villainous. By accepting the stereotype, and trying to live up to the feminine and submissive (to Fudge) role Umbridge apparently believes she is supposed to play, she is denying her true self, and therefore cannot realize her full potential. McGonagall, on the other hand, is true to her own nature and eventually moves out of the subservient role (to Dumbledore) to be headmistress in her own right.

Rowling presents a variety of different roles for women in the series. McGonagall and Umbridge seem to be diametrically opposed – in similar positions, but coming from different philosophies. They are both second in command to powerful men. One of the men is power hungry and selfish and one is concerned for the general welfare of his students, and for the population at large. The women each espouse traits of their mentors, which affect their ultimate outcomes. To demonstrate an entirely different role for a female in Rowling’s Wizarding World, Molly Weasley is introduced. Mrs. Weasley is the Earth Mother type. She has seven children, but seems to be mother to whoever crosses her path. She takes in the wayward Harry and
Hermione when she does not want to go home for holidays. When the group is at Grimmauld place, Mrs. Weasley keeps the house and prepares all the meals for the whole Order of the Phoenix group, in addition to her own family. Throughout most of the series, Mrs. Weasley appears to be merely this “supermom” character. Later on, though, after readers learn of her involvement with the Order, it becomes apparent that Molly Weasley has a past, and is a lot tougher than she seems. In their essay “A Postscript to ‘Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Series.’” Tyson Pugh and David L. Wallace state that “the most satisfying duel occurs between Bellatrix Lestrange and Molly Weasley, who breaks out of her usual role of tending to the home front and knitting sweaters to kill her murderous adversary while shouting an utterly satisfying expletive” (189). It should be noted that Bellatrix Lestrange is the woman who tortured Neville Longbottom’s parents to the point of insanity, disrupting the Longbottom family forever. So it seems that Rowling has paired up another set of opposites. These are both women who are involved in aiding their causes. The difference here is that Molly Weasley is able to balance motherhood with being a warrior in the Order of the Phoenix when necessary. Bellatrix Lestrange seems to be consumed with evil, to the point of insanity, and can do nothing other than be a Death Eater.

Regardless of her toughness, though, Molly Weasley will still always be first and foremost a mother. When Mrs. Weasley, in Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, does some routine “cleaning out” of a desk in the Order’s headquarters, she encounters a boggart, which is a magical creature that becomes an image of the
viewer's worst fear. Molly Weasley sees her children (including Harry) dead in front of her. She knows how to confront this bit of dark magic, and attempts to fight it with the countercurse, but fails because she allows her emotions to overwhelm her. When Lupin has to come to her rescue, she cries to him:

"I see them d-d-dead all the time! ... All the time! I dream about it..." (176).

It makes perfect sense that this would be a fear of hers, in her role as mother to her flock. However, the setting of this scene reminds the reader of the very real possibility of this fear coming to fruition in this world. Cedric Diggory, a student at Hogwarts, died at the end of the previous novel at Voldemort's hand, and the Weasley children are no more immune to that reality than Cedric was. This scene is a revelation of Molly Weasley's complete devotion to her family, and of the profound effect the events of the past few years has had on parents of Hogwarts students.

Despite this fear of hers, as the strong woman she is, Molly Weasley stands up and fights against the force perpetrating these evils. It is interesting to note that in this scene it is Lupin who rescues Molly Weasley from the boggart. Lupin is a werewolf, therefore making in this modern fairy tale the wolf the rescuer and preserver of home and hearth, rather than the destroyer of the same that we saw in "Little Red Cap" and in Block's "Wolf."

Now that the entire series is in publication, it is possible to study these characters across several books. Whereas Zipes writes his essay after the completion of the fourth book in the series, Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace wrote an essay in 2006, after the release of the seventh book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Half*
Blood Prince, critiquing the transformation of the traditional boy’s story in the series. The essay, titled “Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series,” takes issue with the series appearing on the surface to break stereotypes, then on a deeper reading seeming to enforce them: “This incarnation of the school story challenges regressive constructions of gender and sexuality in its apparent treatment of boys and girls as equals, but ultimately squelches gender equality and sexual diversity in favor of the ideological status quo” (260). However, with regard to women’s issues, Pugh and Wallace seem to retract their former view with the release of the final book in the series, and the subsequent release of their “A Postscript to ‘Heteronormative Heroism and Queering the School Story in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Series.’” In this short addendum to their previous essay, they concede the strength of female characters in the series in a discussion of the final book, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows:

certainly, women play important roles in the climactic final battle:
except for Harry’s final confrontation with Voldemort, ... Minerva McGonagall also plays an important role in the defense of Hogwarts during the battle, and even the batty divination professor Sybill Trelawney joins the fray in a unique but surprisingly effective manner (189).

Pugh and Wallace here seem to retract their former attitude that the series stereotypes women, or at least concedes that the stereotypes are broken in the final book. In this essay, Pugh and Wallace are able to examine the series as a whole, as Rowling
intended it, with all of the characters fully developed. Zipes, in his earlier essay had only the first half of the planned series to go on, and is only able to evaluate the development of the characters, and the wizarding world, as Harry Potter perceives it, through his fourteen-year-old eyes. Perhaps viewing the series, the evolution of characters through the series and the complexity of the relationships that develops in the later novels, would have altered to Zipes’ attitude toward the series. It is tempting to assume that Rowling gave credence to the criticism from Zipes, Pugh and Wallace, and others by changing the behavior of the female characters in the final book.

However, if one reads interviews with Rowling, it is evident that the major events and the evolution of each character were carefully planned well in advance of the actual writing of the novels. Rowling explains in the World Book Day Online Chat from August fifteenth, 2004, “book six has been planned for years, but before I started writing seriously I spent two months re-visiting the plan and making absolutely sure I knew what I was doing (learning from my mistakes - I didn’t check the plan for ‘Goblet of Fire’ and had to re-write a third of the book” (World Book Day 2004). Therefore, it could be argued that Rowling planned to show the varied strengths of these women all along, with Hermione as example of a young woman who can embody traits that are stereotypical to both genders in balance.

Book five, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, shows Hermione beginning to develop into a truly powerful woman. Already established as intelligent and magically talented, with the courage to face dangers beyond the scope of a normal fourteen year old, as well as the motivation to spearhead an unpopular activist
movement, in this book she learns to be a leader by taking on the position of prefect. She struggles at first, and then masters the position with grace and aplomb. She gives in to her stress and anxiety in preparation for her exams, slipping back into her habit of letting her insecurities get the best of her, but still manages to handle everything that is asked of her in an exceptional fashion. Additionally, by the beginning of the next installment in the series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, her confidence in her own abilities is boosted as she passes her O.W.L. (Ordinary Wizarding Level) exams with flying colors, proving to herself that this muggle-born really does belong in the wizarding world, and can succeed as a powerful and knowledgeable witch. The *Harry Potter* series is about more than just the war with Voldemort, it is about coming of age in today’s world, where the lines between men and women are blurred, and it demonstrates over and over how both genders, when they work together, can be just as effective, if not more so, than one person acting alone. In the final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Ron becomes frustrated and leaves the group at one point, but Hermione decides to stay. Her education has bred with her rationality, and developed an ability to separate her emotions from her rational thoughts. This is a reversal of the gendered paradigm we have come to expect.

Rowling gives Hermione examples like Minerva McGonagall and Molly Weasley to guide her throughout her adolescence, and by the final book, Hermione has blossomed into a well-rounded young woman. She has excelled academically, had a short romance with a famous Quidditch player, helped to save the world from
an evil overlord, and ultimately consented to her greatest act of bravery: marriage to a Weasley man. In her adult version of Hermione, Rowling has combined the best qualities of McGonagall and Molly Weasley to create a strong, confident, capable, and caring individual.
Chapter Four

Conclusion

Grimm’s original versions of fairy tales and older retellings such as those featured in the “Golden Books” series, and as seen in Disney’s movie versions provide weak and submissive female role models for girls and young women today. What we read, watch, and listen to as children have profound effects on how we make decisions into adulthood. With strong, positive role models, girls can learn to be strong, positive women. With role models that exhibit submissiveness and willingness to endure abuse and neglect, girls are taught that these are appropriate responses to such situations. With examples of women being valued for their beauty, and no other virtue, girls learn that nothing is more important than looking good.

Some authors, such as Francesca Lia Block and Anne Sexton, retell fairy tales with changes to plot, setting, characters, or vantage point aimed at sending a new, and in some cases, more positive message that is in line with contemporary culture and values. When the author places these old, deeply ingrained archetypes into different circumstances, or shows them through a modern lens, it opens up possibilities that were never there in the original. Block shows young women that they have options, and do not have to submit to the same situations that their mothers seemed to take for granted, such as abuse, neglect, or marriage to a stranger for the sake of security. Cinderella doesn’t have to hate her stepsisters and Red Riding Hood doesn’t have to be eaten by the wolf before she can learn to fend him off herself. Sexton’s poems use modern images to make a connection with problems facing women in mid-twentieth-
century America. In “Sleeping Beauty” she touches on sexual abuse, by showing how the poem’s speaker relates to the fairy tale. While Sexton was likely not crusading here, this poem may still resonate with other victims. Cinderella in Sexton’s hands becomes a feminist icon, standing up to the oppression of her stepmother and stepsisters.

Bruno Bettelheim demonstrates how fairy tales actually work on the human psyche. His theories can be assumed to hold true for the retellings discussed here. The original versions of Grimm’s fairy tales are used by Bruno Bettelheim in psychoanalysis of children. The archetypes in the stories appeal to children according to their emotional needs. A child that is wrestling with emerging sexuality might identify with “Red Riding Hood,” with its underlying oedipal messages and cautions about giving in to carnal pleasures. Conversely, a child who feels powerless might latch on to “Hansel and Gretel,” where the children, and especially the girl child, rescue themselves for a change. By identifying with a particular archetype in a story, a child can find answers within his or her subconscious to the dilemmas playing out within the psyche. The child uses the archetype as an example of how to deal with problems in her or his own life.

Modern retellings may function similarly, giving the audience the opportunity to connect with different role-models and archetypes, and providing new options for escape from the problems posed in the stories. By placing Cinderella in a situation where she loves her sisters and has the opportunity to make up with them, Francesca Lia Block, in her story “Glass,” eschews the rescue story from the original, instead
telling a story about the importance of family in addition to the importance of romantic love. Her message is about gathering as many loving souls about a person as possible, instead of the original tale which has Cinderella running away from her problems and exacting revenge upon her enemies. Anne Sexton’s rendition of “Sleeping Beauty” reveals an underlying, albeit subtle, sexual undertone in the original. Sexton deals with this theme in the prelude and postludes to the story, extrapolating the sexual undertone, signaled by the king’s fear of the phallic spindles, into a story about sexual abuse. Perhaps a victim of this type of abuse will read the poem, connect with the experiences related in the poem, and know she is not alone. And perhaps she will read the original tale and see that there is a way out of the situation, and that she still has value, is still worthy of love, regardless of what has happened to her. While Sexton was dealing with her own experiences here, and most likely not trying to reach out to others, the work speaks for itself and readers connect with it in different ways depending on what emotional and psychological baggage they bring to the poem.

New stories in the tradition of Campbell’s heroic cycle are constantly being produced. The *Harry Potter* series embodies values similar to those in the fairy tale retellings, evoking older genres, but using them in entirely new ways. Instead of using a single hero and a damsel in distress, J.K. Rowling has chosen to tell a story of a team of heroes, who are normal kids when they are not saving the world, and who need each other in order to succeed. Rowling’s message is one of teamwork, and of elevating those around us by finding their strengths and using them toward a common
goal. Each of the characters has an inner strength that allows him or her to succeed in
the face of the terrible things Rowling makes them face. Each character is also
flawed, which makes them very human, and easy to relate to. Harry and Ron are not
very good students, and can be very moody and temperamental. Hermione is insecure
and self-conscious about her looks, and has a large fear of failure.

In keeping with the theme of realistic, human characters, Rowling designed
her *Harry Potter* series with an ensemble of flawed heroes who can only succeed if
they combine their various talents and work together. Aspects of adolescents’ coming
of age, and of both genders’ traits are needed, and honored, in this series. The
impetuous nature of teenage boys and the emotional empathy and rational sense of
responsibility of teenage girls, are examples of traits that have contributed to their
success.

By analyzing how modern tales are shaping our culture, readers can better
understand their origins, within the culture that produced them. These stories reflect
the culture from which they sprang, and can reveal a lot about that culture.
Conversely, by examining the reflection of a culture that is a story, one can learn
about oneself by reading tales from one’s own culture. Readers can also use these
tales to situate themselves within the global culture (as in today’s world we are
rapidly becoming one global culture) by taking what they learn about themselves
from these tales and holding that up against tales from other parts of the world. As
humans, we still have a lot to learn from each other, and what better way to start, but
with some good stories?
Works Cited


