

ADVANCED CATEGORY WINNER

EXPOSING A MISINFORMED AND DISABLED FAIRYTALE

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"If we are to achieve a richer culture, we must weave one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place." This quote by Margaret Mead emphasizes the importance of diversity and acceptance in society. A fairy tale often reflects society by telling it in a whimsical way. However, there is a variable that is often present in fairy tales that's not as whimsical—disability. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, a disability is defined as "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity" (ADA), such as deafness or blindness. This definition does not imply the person's life is any less important, but simply outlines the reality of their situation. Within the time period of the famous Grimm Brothers, however, the threat of disease was severe, and death was feared most of all. Only those who were the most physically and mentally able were the ones who prospered and gained benefits in society. There was more of a survival instinct to favor those without disabilities. That is less true in today's society, and thankfully there are now resources for people with disabilities to live a more fulfilling life, and awareness of accessibility is on the rise. This statement greatly conflicts with the themes present in famous fairy tales, which often teach critical morals negating the possibility that a disabled person's life can be fulfilling.

The fairy tale "Rapunzel" is by no accounts an unhappy tale

by the end of the story. In true Grimm Brothers fashion, it deals with themes of sexuality and cautiousness in the face of strangers. Rapunzel is taken from her mother and father after she is born because of a bargain her father made with a fairy in exchange for vegetables from the fairy's garden. Rapunzel is taken to a high tower and lives in isolation except for visits from the fairy. One day a prince comes by and falls in love with Rapunzel and pays her many visits until the fairy tricks him and sends him toppling off the tower. It is here that he loses his sight and is left to wander in the wilderness "eating nothing but grass and roots, and [doing] nothing but weep[ing]" (Grimm 13). The prince lives a truly miserable life until he is finally able to lead himself back to Rapunzel.

Ultimately, the prince's story has a happy ending, but it isn't realistic. In her article entitled "Blindness as Metaphor," Naomi Schor recounts her struggle with the decrease of her vision and the effect it had on her daily life "I could read but my depth perception was gone, ascending and especially descending staircases became a perilous exercise, and, of course, driving was out of the question" (82). Schor had a much less dramatic reason to lose her sight. Instead of falling off a high tower, she succumbed to the effects of age. While this is still disheartening, it also is quite easy to understand how this could actually happen to anyone. Disabilities in fairy tales are often represented by dwarfs or goblins, or other manners of inhuman characters. Disability should not be seen as being a type of punishment, or even as abnormal, as it is most often portrayed in fairy tales.

The Grimm Brothers wrote down many fairy tales they had collected from oral tradition. Conveniently they reveal social ideals within their late 19th-Century society. The prospect of having a disability, which is in this case blindness, is extremely frightening. There is some fascination with disability, too. For example, what is completely normal to some people, is completely impossible for others. Within the story of Rapunzel, the prince wanders alone in the woods for a number

of years after he is blinded. Lacking resources and apparently the will to try and return to the kingdom he belonged to, he is able to exist in a place of living but not exactly to the fullest. Instead of dying, the prince is reduced to a shell of his former self, being neither fully human nor a monster. He exists in this place until Rapunzel cures him of his blindness. After this, he is completely restored to a whole person within his full capacities. This idea of being less than a full person is outrageous, but sadly reflects the ideals of the past.

While the stigma behind disabilities has softened in recent years, the stereotype that has emerged through fairy tales is very much present in contemporary variations. In Neil Gaiman's retelling of Snow White called *Snow Glass Apples*, he incorporates an interesting description of the characters that live in the forest: "A greedy, dangerous, feral people; some were stunted—dwarfs and midgets and hunchbacks; others had the huge teeth and vacant gazes of idiots; some had fingers like flippers or crab claws" (Gaiman 329). What he is implying in his work is the typical fairytale trait of deformity, linked to villainy. Here in this context, the forest people are regarded as lesser than or less human than the other town folk. This same comparison can be made in the traditional fairy tales, such as Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*. In a passage spoken by the prince, he remarks his dilemma to the little mermaid, that he must choose between her and another woman: "She is not like the beautiful maiden in the temple, whom you resemble. If I were forced to choose a bride, I would rather choose you, my dumb foundling" (Andersen 10). Here, the mute mermaid is regarded as only almost enough. Unfortunately for her, she holds the trait of being a "dumb foundling". This reflects the survival instinct present in fairy tales, which is to reward the most physically and mentally able. Anyone not up to the qualifications is seen as inferior. Organizations like The Whole Person work to break down these stereotypes, which can very easily still be instilled into the minds of children even today, with works such as Gaiman's *Snow Glass Apples*. One of their main

goals is to uplift the people they serve and educate the community they are working for.

This semester, I was granted the opportunity to intern at The Whole Person (TWP). Specifically, I helped with their annual art exhibition called Expressions. The Whole Person is a non-profit organization that works to connect people with disabilities to the resources they need to help live stable and fulfilling lives. As the name of the company alludes to, it is strictly against regarding people with disabilities as less than a full person; they are regarded in just the same way as any person without a disability. According to The Whole Person's mission statement, they picture "a fully accessible community where opportunities and choices are not limited by disability" (TWP). They execute this idea in a variety of different ways. For example, when I first started working, I was told to not label the artists as "disabled artists" but rather as "artists with disabilities". The key was to not let a person's disability define them; it simply is one part of them that makes them unique.

Every fairy tale is a reflection of the social tendencies present in the society it was created in. With that understanding in mind, it is important to look into the history of disability, and the stigma assigned to it. The consensus of disabilities was generally negative during the late 19th Century, the time the Grimm Brothers wrote their stories. During their lifetime, the brothers wrote seven editions of their collection of fairy tales, all of which underwent large changes. By the time of the seventh edition, the stories had become drastically different from the original edition (Zipes). Like any good scholars, the Grimm brothers were adapting their stories to better fit the environment they lived in. They were not writing to children when they first started, but as time progressed, they adapted their stories for a young audience. By the seventh edition, these stories imparted morals onto the children who read them. Unfortunately, the morals taught in regard to people with disabilities were not positive ones. In her book, *No Right to Be Idle: The Invention of Disability*, Sarah F. Rose discusses how people with

disabilities in 19th Century America were often sent to what was called "Asylums for Idiots". By definition, "idiots" were "people with a wide range of impairments, including cerebral palsy, epilepsy, deafness, and what would later be described as autism, as well as cognitive disabilities... in general, 'idiot' referred to a person who was not able to care for himself or herself, do useful labor, or understand the legal consequences of his or her actions" (Rose 14). The conditions listed in this definition are, in fact, conditions that can describe a disability. However, what is no longer accurate or deemed acceptable in today's society is how people with these conditions were considered. Today, the term "idiot" is of course viewed as deeply insulting and is rarely justified in being used to describe a person. The same logic can be applied to the term "dumb," which is viewed as a negative insult. In the classic fairy tale by Andersen, the little mermaid is regarded as dumb, as shown in the above paragraph. Today's readers would find such words offensive. However, at the time these stories were written, these words were simply what was used to describe someone with a disability. What can be concluded from this observation is that as time passed, these words changed definition from descriptive, if ignorant, into hateful words due to the general stigma placed on the people they originally represented.

It should be explained that while there has been a great misunderstanding about people with disabilities for many years, it does not mean authors such as the Grimm Brothers were trying to be heartless in their portrayal of those with disabilities. In her book, *Disability, Deformity, and Disease in the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, Ann Schmiesing elaborates on a statement made by Jacob Grimm. She argues that "[Jacob] claims that a blind person will often have the extraordinary ability to almost see with his or her fingertips, or a deaf person will often have extraordinary taste and smell" (147). Here, Jacob Grimm is trying to regard all people with disabilities as capable of achieving a highly inert sense to make up for the one they have lost. When exam-

ining the fairy tales Grimm collected and edited, this same philosophy shines through. In the case of "Rapunzel," the prince initially loses his sight and manages to wander the forest until, by some chance, he leads himself to where Rapunzel is staying. After losing his ability to see, the Grimm Brothers allow this character to succeed through some secondary sense created because of the loss of his sight. Schmiesing comments on this idea by explaining that through this act of "compensating" some people would try to disregard a person's actual disability or "psychologically erase the reality of the impairment" (148). In many cases, a disability does not cause another sense to become hypersensitive, and to try and argue so is offensive to individuals who only want to be accepted as themselves.

In *The Little Mermaid*, the main character was shown to feel some hesitancy toward what she has to offer once her voice is taken away. The witch offers words of compensation such as "your beautiful form, your graceful walk, and your expressive eyes" (Andersen 8). However, that is all for nothing because as the end of the story shows, the little mermaid's other attributes are unable to make up for her muteness. This shows that characters with conditions such as the little mermaid's are truly seen as the lowest in society, as illustrated by what is written of them in children's tales. In fairy tales, characters with disabilities more frequently than not are given the short end of the stick as either villains or as tragic characters doomed to remain unhappy their entire life.

Fairy tales are known for their morals on how to be a proper citizen in society, however, those such as "Rapunzel" and *The Little Mermaid*, and even some contemporary retellings, neglect to teach proper morals on how people with disabilities are also a valuable part of society. If one followed the ideals outlined in classic fairy tales, people with disabilities would be seen as lesser than and without worth. From a historical background, this was the general opinion of disabilities around the time when the Grimm Brothers were writing their

famous stories. By effect, this ideal is reflected in their work. Thankfully, there is now more understanding and acceptance of people with disabilities and the outlooks on life they possess. Disability is not a disease that needs a cure, which was believed in the past. It is simply a variation on the mental or physical level that changes the way a person navigates life. Unfortunately, in years past a negative stigma behind disabilities has formed, and in some ways still exists today. It is important to remember, the actions taken in the past to assist or categorize people with disabilities were not necessarily done with malicious intent, but were done through a simple misunderstanding of someone different from them.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

Context

1. Think about your community, whether it be UMKC (online or in-person), the stores you typically shop at, your place of worship, etc. What are some ways those spaces are accessible, and in what ways are they not? What does accessibility mean beyond wheelchair ramps and elevators? Such things are important tools for accessibility, but our thinking on the topic often stops there.

Style

1. How is Seider's own experience as an intern at The Whole Person working to help develop her argument?
2. Seider's two main examples of disability in fairytales are the Grimm Brother's version of "Rapunzel" and Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." What is the effect of weaving these two examples throughout the essay, as opposed to a structure that separates them more?