

Teaching a Unit of Fairy Tales

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Fairy tales are a good beginning for a course in children's literature because they are familiar but unsettling. Students typically feel superior to children's literature—the ultimate Micky Mouse course, the one in which you actually study Mickey Himself. They need to have their complacencies disturbed before they can begin to learn anything. Since most of them will admit to knowing at least a few fairy tales, a discussion of fairy tales shows them the fascinating oddity of what they take for granted. This is productively unsettling. And as it happens, I'm convinced that the fascinating oddity of fairy tales is a key to much that is important in all sorts of writing for children, so I personally find fairy tales a particularly sound way to start a course.

I start by asking my students to tell me the story of Little Red Riding Hood. Besides breaking their inevitable shyness, this storytelling makes the point that they all *do* know the story, that in fact they have always known it and cannot remember when they first heard it. But it also shows them that they all know it differently. So they see both the enormous staying power and the enormous flexibility of fairy tales. I use "Little Red Riding Hood" because it is one of the few stories told by both Perrault and the Grimm brothers—and also because I have a large personal collection of versions of the story that come into use later in the course.

I ask each student in turn to tell a sentence of the story. Everyone else is allowed to add details, or subtract them, or to suggest alternatives, whenever it seems necessary. This usually turns into a delightfully chaotic free-for-all, and many different versions of the story get told at once.

After the storytelling, I offer some history as an explanation for all the variations. I start by reading them a translation of the original Perrault version. They are shocked by its abrupt ending, which allows the wolf the pleasure of his little-girl feast without a breath of retribution. So it's easy to make the point that later versions, including their own, have different and happier endings because of changes in attitudes toward children and what we think they should hear. A glance at the Grimms' "Little Red Cap" reveals attitudes quite opposite to Perrault's: for Perrault, Little Red *ought* to have known better, and she receives a just punishment for being too innocent; but in the Grimm story, she is saved (by a grownup, of course) and learns that she must always listen to grownups *because* she is innocent. In the century between these two stories innocence became a virtue instead of a danger. Pointing out to students this complete revision in attitudes shows them how local and relatively new our own deepseated

convictions about children are; I hope it makes them question those convictions, so that they begin to judge literature on its own merits, and not in terms of its presumed effect on children.

After that, a quick trip through history shows how "Little Red" became less violent (and less interesting) as the years passed.¹ First Little Red is eaten, then she is eaten but rescued, then she is not eaten at all; in recent versions she sometimes doesn't even meet the wolf in the forest. The grandmother, at first eaten and then eaten but rescued, next hides in the closet and then just runs away; in one version, she isn't even home when the wolf arrives. Finally, the wolf, who first triumphed and was then killed, just runs away and is never seen again; even worse, he is turned into a figure of fun, a bumbling incompetent who trips over chairs and looks silly in nightgowns.

All of this shows the protectiveness of our attitudes to children, and allows students to consider the overriding importance of attitudes towards children in discussions of children's literature. It also introduces them to the idea of investigating children's stories for the attitudes they inevitably contain—an important aspect of the course to follow.

The considerations of all these changes also allows me to point out two things: one, fairy tales can be told in many different ways, but two, all the different versions have something in common—they all tell the same story. These two qualities form the basis for the next two parts of the course.

First I use the flexibility of fairy tales to introduce my students to the detailed analysis of children's books. I divide the class into small discussion groups, and give each group *one* version of Little Red Riding Hood. I ask each group to answer three questions: what is unusual or distinctive about this version of the story? is it a good version of the fairy tale? is it a good story? I give one group a highly detailed novelistic version, another an exceedingly simplified one, another a very moral one, another which offers long boring explanations for everything that happens, another a modern re-telling. Since most of these versions are in books with pictures, this exercise also gives students a chance to begin developing their skills at describing and analyzing pictures.

After the groups report to the rest of us on the books they looked at, I bring to class a giant stack of all the Little Red Riding Hoods I own—somewhere around forty. I make a few comments on each of them. Many of them represent the worst sorts of contemporary publishing practices, and

my discussion of them introduces students to numerous problems—relationships between words and pictures, books as toys, styles of illustration, the reasons for illustrations in children's books, the deficiencies of limited-vocabulary story-telling, our insistence that literature be "educational," and so on. The discussion reinforces the need for standards in judging children's books, and the equal need for skills of comparison and analysis. It also tells my students more than they ever wanted to know about Little Red Riding Hood, and they are quite happy to leave it (or, as it happens, *almost* leave it) and go on to something else.

The something else is the key question implied by the discussion of all the various Little Reds: what remains consistent in them? Or more generally, what is it about the popular fairy tales that makes them so memorable?

In order to find that out, I ask students to name the fairy tales they *all* know. After much tossing out of suggestions that some of them reject, we always end up with the exact same list:

Little Red Riding Hood (of course)
The Three Little Pigs
Goldilocks and the Three Bears
Jack and the Beanstalk
Cinderella
Sleeping Beauty
Snow White
Hansel and Gretel

I find this unanimity amazing. These are the stories all my students always know and believe they could tell if asked to do so. The only other serious candidates are the stories of Rapunzel and Rumpelstiltskin.

After having arrived at a list, we consider it. I ask my class if these stories have any qualities in common. I organize the discussion around the usual literary qualities—character, plot, setting, diction, tone.² This leads to a detailed consideration of the specific unusual qualities of fairy tales, the ways in which they differ from our usual assumptions about the qualities of good fiction. Among other things, I get my students to notice the flatness and passivity of the characters in fairy tales, the curious way in which "good" and "evil" are defined, the lack of physical detail, the emphasis on action rather than character or meaning, the surprising lack of suspense, the nostalgic vagueness of the setting, the peculiarities of geography, the kinds of magic that are and are not possible, the matter-of-fact tone, the differences between successful ways to tell stories and unsuccessful ones. This is an important discussion that continues through two or three class hours. It establishes many of the qualities of other sorts of children's literature to be discussed later in the course.

Having determined the distinctive characteristics of fairy tales, I ask the class to consider the problems raised by their use as children's literature. In particular, we look at the effects of various kinds of censorship. I start by telling them a few versions of the story of the Frog King, to try to make them see the strange effects of changing details (or removing them) on the meaning of the story as a whole. I try to show them how different versions inevitably imply different attitudes toward the story and make it mean different things.

After that, I have students discuss various of the gruesome details in the Grimm tales that contemporary retellings leave out. I tell them the story of the Juniper Tree, and ask them whether or not they would read it to children. I read them a silly non-sexist version of Cinderella, and have them respond to it.³ Finally, I ask them to consider the questions raised by the change, in recent printings of the Puffin *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, of the story "The Jew in the Bush" to "The Miser in the Bush."⁴ All of these stories seriously challenge, but I hope finally confirm, their newfound regard for complete, accurate versions of fairy tales; at the least they are forced to think carefully about their own attitudes. This section of the course also re-introduces the question of the relationship between judgements about children's literature and the needs of children, at a point when students are better equipped to deal with it. We can talk about the *uses* of literature on the basis of some understanding of the literature itself.

Next I try to make students conscious of the ways in which storytellers *always* change the meanings of the stories they tell into something distinctly their own; in other words, I ask them to consider fairy tales as literature. I have them read the Perrault fairy tales in the reasonably accurate translation by Angela Carter,⁵ and to try to determine what Perrault's contribution to these stories might have been. That ought to be impossible, since Perrault's versions of these stories were the first to be recorded in print; but in fact, there are surprising and interesting differences between Perrault's versions and the ones my students *remember*, and a consideration of the differences makes some valuable points about artistry in storytelling. In order to determine the differences, students must exercise their skills of literary analysis, and that is especially important; the major thrust of my course is to encourage them to read children's books with care and sensitivity, so that they can make informed and persuasive judgements about them.

Finally, I ask students to consider other uses of folk material in children's literature in relation to their understanding of traditional European fairy tales. I again divide them into discussion groups, and give each group a story to analyze. One group gets a children's version of a North American Indian legend, another a French-Canadian story, another a story by Hans Christian Andersen, another a fairy

tales by John Gardner, and so on. I ask students to decide how these stories are similar to traditional fairy tales and how they differ from them, and also to consider whether or not they are good stories. Each group then chooses spokespersons to read the stories to the class as a whole and lead discussions of them. This reinforces everything we have done so far; it also emphasizes the importance of reading well when reading children's stories aloud.

All of this takes fifteen or more class hours—a sizeable portion of a fairly short course. But I think it worth the time. It introduces students to a wide spectrum of the problems and controversies of children's literature, and forces them to exercise the skills basic to literary criticism on material they would otherwise take for granted. It also gives them insight into the vast range of children's books, shows the need for standards, and, I hope, encourages their respect both for good storytelling and for the children who might, given half a chance, respond to it.

NOTES

¹I discuss this in "Little Red Riding Hood Rides Again—and Again and Again and Again," *Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Conference of the Children's Literature Association*, ed. Margaret Esmonde and Priscilla Ord (Villanova, 1979), 70-77.

²Part of this discussion is based on my article "What Makes a Fairy Tale Good: The Queer Kindness of 'The Golden Bird,'" *Children's Literature in Education* 8, 3 (1977), 101-108.

³Richard A. Gardner, M.D., "Cinderella," *Dr. Gardner's Fairy Tales for Today's Children* (Prentice-Hall, 1978).

⁴See "The Case of the Disappearing Jew," *Children's Literature in Education* 10, 1 (1979), 44-48.

⁵(Avon, 1979).

The Importance of Being Earnest: The Fairy Tale in 19th-Century England

Patricia Miller

Students of the history of children's literature are thoroughly familiar with the dispute surrounding the reputation of the fairy tale in England at the beginning of the 19th Century. On the one hand, moralists and religious leaders found it hard to believe that tales of giant beanstalks, seven-league boots, and men the size of one's thumb could provide ethical guidance for their young pupils. Similarly, educational reformers regarded fairy tales suspiciously because of their failure to teach anything specific. After all, weren't lessons in arithmetic, geography, and religion more valuable than having a good time?

In 1853, of course, Charles Dickens vigorously attacked these narrow and utilitarian views of fairy literature in his article, "Frauds on the Fairies," which asserted that in an age when men were rapidly becoming machines and slaves to reason, fairy tales were to be respected and permitted to do their important job of nurturing men's feelings and imagination. Dickens was also quick to point out, however, that in addition to providing imaginative stimulation to children, fairy tales could also *teach*:

It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force—many

such good things have been nourished in the child's heart by this powerful aid.¹

While Dickens' essay does much to defend fairy tales in general against the stern pietism of Puritan literature and the bleak didacticism of the Age of Reason, it does not address the unique qualities of the fairy tale in 19th-century England. How, for example, are the fairy tales of two eminent Victorians such as Dickens or John Ruskin different from those of Perrault or Grimm? What makes them distinctly Victorian?

One quality which helps to distinguish the Victorian fairy tale from its European counterparts is its unique quality of *earnestness*. The one thing that every scholar of 19th-century literature knows is that the Victorians were "earnest," but what is meant by this and why they were is difficult to say. We know that the Victorians regarded earnestness as a positive moral attribute, and that the absence of it—whether in an individual or in a society—was decidedly bad. Among modern critics, Walter Houghton has provided perhaps the most helpful definition of the term in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*:

The [Victorian] prophets of earnestness were attacking a casual, easy-going, superficial, or frivolous attitude whether in intellectual or in moral life; and demanding