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## The Fairy Tales and Anne Sexton's Transformation with Reference to Female Protagonists in Cinderella

A B S T R U C T

Literature encompasses a wide range of genres, and fairy tales hold a significant position, particularly in children's literature, as they serve as an important avenue for children to explore and familiarize themselves with the English language and culture. Anne Sexton, a renowned writer known for her introspective style, has been a subject of both acclaim and controversy. However, Sexton's poetry is deeply influenced by European culture, especially the realm of fairy tales, where she undertakes the task of reimagining well-known tales with a specific emphasis on female protagonists. This article employs a methodological approach to examine Sexton's reinterpretation of these canonical narratives, providing valuable insights into the genre itself. Sexton's collection, "Transformations," serves as a valuable resource for understanding the fairy tale genre. According to Jack Zipes, a prominent scholar in fairy tale studies, fairy tales are fictional narratives that convey moral lessons and aid in language acquisition among children. It is essential to adapt fairy tales to suit the needs of children, as they contribute to enhancing their communication skills. However, when poetry, character development, and reality intersect, a captivating juxtaposition emerges. Sexton's pessimistic perspective alters the emotional landscape of the tales, thereby transforming the moral messages conveyed in her poems. Consequently, this adaptation brings to the forefront the clash between traditional, male-centric beliefs and feminism. To provide a comprehensive assessment of the issues under scrutiny, this study thoroughly examines and analyzes the recurring tales, their archetypal elements, specific structures employed in the poems, the portrayal of fictional characters, references to folklore, and characteristic attributes present in Sexton's works. By delving into these aspects, we gain a deeper understanding of the thematic and stylistic choices made by Sexton and their implications in the context of the fairy tale genre.

**الحكايات الخرافية والتحول لدى الكاتبة آن سيكستون بالإشارة إلى البطلات الإناث في قصة سندريلا**

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**الخلاصة:**

الأدب يشمل مجموعة واسعة من الأنواع، وتحتل الحكايات الخرافية مكانة مهمة، خاصة في الأدب الطفولي، حيث تعد ممرًا مهمًا للأطفال لاستكشاف والتعرف على اللغة الإنجليزية والثقافة. آن سيكستون، الكاتبة الشهيرة المعروفة بأسلوبها التأملي، قد كانت محط جدل وإشادة على حد سواء. ومع ذلك، فإن شعر سيكستون متأثر عميقًا بالثقافة الأوروبية، وخصوصًا في عالم الحكايات الخرافية، حيث تقوم بمهمة إعادة تصور الحكايات المعروفة مع التركيز بشكل خاص على الشخصيات النسائية. يستخدم هذا المقال منهجية لفحص إعادة تفسير سيكستون لهذه السرديات الكانونية، مما يقدم نقاط نظر قيمة في سياق النوع نفسه. تعد مجموعة سيكستون "التحويلات" مصدرًا قيمًا لفهم نوع الحكاية الخرافية. ووفقًا لجاك زيبس، العالم البارز في دراسة الحكايات الخرافية، فإن الحكايات الخرافية هي سرديات خيالية تنقل دروسًا أخلاقية وتساعد في اكتساب اللغة لدى الأطفال. من الضروري تكييف الحكايات الخرافية لتناسب احتياجات الأطفال، حيث تساهم في تعزيز مهارات التواصل لديهم. ومع ذلك، عندما يتقاطع الشعر وتطور الشخصيات والواقع، ينشأ تناقض مثير للاهتمام. تعمل النظرة المتشائمة لسيكستون على تغيير المشهد العاطفي للحكايات، مما يحول بالتالي الرسائل الأخلاقية التي تنقلها قصائدها. وبالتالي، يبرز هذا التكيف التصادم بين المعتقدات التقليدية التي تركز على الذكور والنسوية. لتوفير تقييم شامل للقضايا المطروحة، يدرس هذا البحث بعناية الحكايات المتكررة، والأنماط الأسطورية، والهياكل الشعرية المحددة المستخدمة في القصائد، وتصوير الشخصيات الخيالية، والإشارات إلى التراث الشعبي، والسمات المميزة الموجودة في أعمال سيكستون. من خلال التعمق في هذه الجوانب، نكتسب فهمًا أعمق للاختيارات الثيماتية والأسلوبية التي قامت بها سيكستون وتأثيراتها في سياق نوع الحكاية الخرافية.

**الكلمات المهمة:** الحكايات الخرافية، سيكستون، التحويل، الشخصيات النسائية، سندريلا.

## 1. Introduction

The utilization of fairy tales as supplementary material for readers is worth considering. Fairy tales possess a unique quality as they can transport young readers or students into a completely magical world, evoking a sense of mystery, excitement, and awe. Furthermore, they hold the potential to unlock the forgotten wisdom and knowledge of humanity. Incorporating literature, such as fairy tales, into the classroom can be a valuable strategy to engage learners holistically, as it provides rich material capable of eliciting powerful emotional responses from students (Lazar, 1993).

## 2. Fairy Tales as a Concept

In the enchanting world of fairy tales, one can encounter a myriad of legendary characters such as fairies, goblins, princes, and princesses. These tales belong to a distinct category of folklore. Originally, they were passed down orally from generation to generation before being transcribed onto paper. Upon closer examination, it became evident that the Cinderella story, for instance, existed in not just one, but multiple versions. Each narrative bore unique cultural and narrator-specific details that were tied to the specific time and place of its initial telling. Even today, new fairy tales continue to be written, albeit by a diverse array of authors (Kready, 1916; Hallett & Karasek, 2009).

## 2.1 Fairy Tales by Definition

Numerous attempts have been made to establish precise definitions for fairy tales. One characterization defines fairy tales as a genre of literature encompassing short, imaginative, traditional tales with a strong emphasis on moral and magical elements (Anderson, 2000, p.1). However, this definition may lack precision. Alternatively, fairy tales are commonly described as a literary genre that typically incorporates magical and fantastical elements, along with archetypal characters and ethically-themed narratives. These stories are marked by the hopeful necessity of a joyful ending, embodying both fulfilled desires and ideas that are on the verge of becoming reality (Tatar, 1987). Indeed, the definition of a fairy tale can vary depending on different sources.

The Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore defines a fairy tale as a collection of oral narratives that revolve around magical tests, quests, and transformations (Simpson and Roud, 2003: 117). On the other hand, the Illustrated Oxford Dictionary provides two distinct explanations: (a) a children's tale involving fairies, and (b) an extraordinary story or fabrication (Kindersley, 1998: 284). These definitions highlight the diverse interpretations and understandings of fairy tales within different contexts and perspectives. Thus, the term "fairy tale" has its origins in France, where it was first coined. In 1697, Madame d'Aulnoy began publishing a series of collections featuring imaginative tales that she collectively titled "Les contes des fées" (Tales of Fairies) (Ashliman, 2004). These stories, originating from France, were among the first to be compiled and recorded after being collected from oral traditions. While fairy tales may have diverse definitions, they all share a common emphasis on fantastical creatures and magical elements that create a sense of otherworldliness within the narrative.

**Excerpt: 1**

*"Fairy tale is a narrative in prose about the fortunes and misfortunes of a hero or heroine who, having experienced various adventures of a more or less supernatural kind, lives happily ever after. Magic, charms, disguise and spells are some of the major ingredients of such stories (/.../)"* (Cuddon,1998).

**2.2 A Historical Glimpse of Fairy Tales**

As noted by Kready (1916) and Bailey (2008), fairy tales have their roots in an oral tradition. Before the emergence of written literature, these stories were primarily passed down through spoken word and often featured tragic endings. According to Grimms, the development of the fairy tale evolved from an early stage characterized by rawness and intensity to a later stage where the stories took on a more polished yet somewhat stagnant quality (Bailey, 1916). Additionally, Andrew Lang also contributes to the discussion on fairy tales, but further information or context is needed to provide a more accurate response.

**Excerpt: 2**

*"For the roots of stories, we must look, not in the clouds but upon the earth, not in the various aspects of nature but in the daily occurrences and surroundings, in the current opinions and ideas of savage life."*

During the nineteenth century, there was a significant flourishing of folklore as storytellers from various cultures began to document their oral traditions in written form (Bailey, 2008; Hallett & Karasek, 2009). Joseph Jacobs, a notable collector, compiled works such as "English Fairy Tales" (1890) and "More English Fairy Tales" (1894). These collections became integral to children's literature in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, it is important to note that fairy tales are not exclusively meant for children. They possess a unique quality that can captivate readers of all ages. Adults were likely the primary audience for fairy tales in the past, alongside young readers (Bailey, 2008). In later fairy tales, the inclusion of stories featuring princes, princesses, battles, and adventures became prevalent. Fairies, on the other hand, assumed more supporting roles. A common feature of these tales was the incorporation of moral lessons or the inclusion of happy endings. In modern times, parents can feel at ease reading fairy tales to their children, as the level of violence has been reduced. These stories often possess a positive moral structure, where evil is punished and goodness is rewarded in the end (Bailey, 2008; Hallett & Karasek, 2009).

**2.3 Features of Fairy Tales**

Folklore generally includes stories like fairy tales. The fundamentals of fairy tales consist: (Ashliman, 2004; Hallett & Karasek, 2009; Kready 1916):

- Distinct expressions like "Once upon a time", "In a far-far away land", "There once was", "A long, long time ago", "They lived happily ever after," and "They lived for many, many joyful years..." are common at the beginning and end of fairy tales.

- Time and location are always a mystery in fairy tales. The Grimm fairy tales typically take place in enchanted woodlands, though castles, kingdoms, and far-off locations all make appearances. The forest may not be enchanted, but it certainly is full of enchantments and mystical components and serves as a location of change in many fairy tales, including those of Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel.

- For instance, The Fisherman and His Wife, and The Frog Prince all feature princes and princesses, heroes and heroines, as well as poor farmers, youngest sons, wise old women, beggars, and soldiers.

- The protagonist is frequently motivated by a desire to improve the world. In the fable "The Magic Porridge Pot," for instance, a hungry girl and her mother venture into the woods in search of sustenance. She hoped that by assisting her mom, she could stop going hungry herself.

- Good guys and bad guys are usually easy to spot in fairy tales. Good and evil are clearly distinguished between the stories of Red Riding Hood and the great bad wolf.

- Magic is a common component of fairy tales. One can find both good and bad uses for magic. For instance, in the story of the little girl and the magic porridge pot, when the daughter used the pot properly, no one was harmed, but when the mother tried to use it, everything in town was coated with porridge.

- Typically, a problem or conflict that needs resolving is at the heart of a fairy tale's plot.

- The moral or lesson to be learned from a fairy tale is a common element. They have been utilized by many people across many civilizations to convey important truths about living. (VanGundy, 2008).

### 3. Methodology

According to Haase's (2008) classification, fairy tales are episodically structured fictional stories. This article adopts Haase's classification as a framework to analyze the specified text (Cinderella) and its theme/motif. The setting of fairy tales is often unspecified, characterized by

an unreal style and supernatural actions by the characters. The article focuses on the formulaic language and recurring patterns found in fairy tales, revealing underlying depictions. Fairy tales can be found in various forms, including oral traditions, written accounts, and animated films.

## 4. The Art of Transformation: Anne Sexton's Innovative Approach to Fairy-tale Poetry

The conventional notion that narrating fairy tales is solely intended for children is challenged by esteemed scholar Jack Zipes, who has extensively studied the field of fairy tale studies. Contrary to popular belief, fairy tales were not created exclusively for young audiences. These tales were initially crafted by adult men and women countless centuries ago as a means of fostering communal bonds and addressing the mysteries of the natural world. In the present day, fairy tales continue to hold relevance as a source of hope and inspiration in a world that often feels fraught with impending disasters and crises (Zipes, 2007). Defining fairy tales poses a notable challenge, as the genre defies precise and universally accepted categorization. As Anderson (2000) aptly states, it is "easier to illustrate than to define." Fairy tales exhibit a complex and multifaceted nature that eludes clear boundaries and resists being easily defined. Zipes (2000) further asserts that there is a prevalent tendency among Western readers to resist providing a definitive definition for the fairy tale genre. This resistance may arise from the ever-evolving and adaptive nature of fairy tales, as they continuously transform and adapt to suit the needs and expectations of different societies and cultures.

Furthermore, Zipes (2000) suggests that the classification of a narrative as a fairy tale depends on how an author strategically employs aesthetic and ideological elements to evoke curiosity and challenge societal norms. The fairy tale serves as a vehicle for exploring and questioning established conventions, inviting readers to engage with the narrative on multiple levels and prompting them to reflect upon the societal guidelines and values embedded within the tales. In summary, the perception that fairy tales are exclusively intended for children is challenged by scholars like Jack Zipes. Fairy tales have a rich history rooted in communal storytelling and serve as a source of solace and optimism in troubled times. Defining the fairy tale genre proves challenging due to its multifaceted nature and resistance to rigid categorization. However, the genre's power lies in its ability to evoke curiosity and provoke thought, allowing authors to aesthetically and ideologically shape the narrative in response to societal expectations and norms.

Despite ongoing debates about the definition of fairy tales, their enduring popularity remains widespread. Fairy tales have captivated audiences throughout history, leaving a lasting impact on readers' lives and contributing to the cultural fabric of American society. W.H. Auden, a notable figure, asserts that fairy tales hold immense significance and are considered essential books that form the foundation of Western culture. Auden even suggests that fairy tales rank in importance alongside the Bible (Tatar, 1999). Furthermore, it has been cautioned that neglecting to read fairy tales as a child can lead to spiritual impoverishment. These tales have the power to awaken dormant emotions and foster empathy for the marginalized. They offer timeless wisdom and touch the hearts of readers across different ages and generations. Hidden within their narratives are profound insights that resonate universally (Tatar, 2019). Despite evolving over the centuries, fairy tales remain beloved by readers of all ages. Their longevity is evident in their existence for thousands of years, with the genre solidifying in the 1800s and continuing to evolve in the present day (Zipes, 2009).

Fairy tales have garnered a dedicated following among writers, and their enduring popularity can be attributed to the way they address universal human concerns, dreams, and challenges. The timeless themes and narratives found in fairy tales continue to captivate and inspire writers across generations. Jack Zipes goes so far as to suggest that as long as fairy tales exist, they will continue to fascinate and exert a profound influence on people.

Excerpt: 3

> *"awaken our wonderment and enable us to project counter worlds to our present society, [fairy tales] will serve a meaningful social and aesthetic function, not just for compensation but for revelation: The worlds portrayed by the best of our fairy tales are like magic spells of enchantment that actually free us. Instead of petrifying our minds, they arouse our imagination and compel us to realize how we can fight terror and cunningly insert ourselves into our daily struggles, turning the course of the world's events in our favor"* (Zipes, 2013, p. 31).

Even though different poets have used fairytales in their works, they have all fallen prey to the magic spells they cast. Poets were not immune to these effects. A new subgenre of lyrical poetry called fairytale poetry eventually emerges, receiving little attention from academic circles. There was a large body of fairytale poetry in the nineteenth century, and it has grown

significantly since then. In the past, fairytale poetry was just a straightforward recitation of the stories. It didn't go beyond "stylistic variations" of the old-fashioned fairytales. (Zipes, 2015).

Nonetheless, modern poets have continued this tradition, albeit with new techniques. They couldn't ignore the amusing substantial supplied by fairy tales. Yet, these poets must use them to achieve their goals. The result is a stunning reimagining of fairy tales as a poetry genre. Except for a few pieces, modern fairytale poetry is regarded as a genre's serious response to fairy tales that become part of an acknowledged past. Modern poets have translated fairy tales into "parodistic, satirical, or cynical anti-fairy tales, these poems often contain serious social criticisms", and by doing so" the readers are supposed to re-evaluate societal problems". (Ibid, p.389).

The most notable difference in fairy tale production, however, is the feminist fairy-story creation that frequently questions gender roles concerning one's own experiences poetically to be set as revolting against fairy tales, by which a new beginning is breathed. (Ibid, 2015). Anne Sexton is the most prominent and successful feminist poet who actively challenged and appropriated fairy tales in her poetry astonishingly. Anne Sexton (b. 1928 – d. 1974) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning confessional poet who wrote feminist and modernist poetry. In her most experimental poems, she freely addresses literary taboos such as liberation, incest, abortion, illegitimacy, mental illness, suicide, and familial ties. (Snodgrass, 2006).

Sexton is unquestionably one of the most recognized American woman poets. Her poetry is highly regarded because of her pioneering insistence on artfully transforming difficult individual practices and forbidden subjects. She did so to open the way for newcomers lot of poets to easily write concerning their needs. According to Maxine Kumin (2001) women poets particularly "owe a debt to Anne Sexton" as she" broke new ground, shattered taboos, and endured a barrage of attacks along the way because of the flamboyance of her subject matter, which, twenty years later, seems far less daring." (p, xxxiv).

Anne Sexton's collection "Transformations" published in 1971 is considered essential reading for American women poets. Her poetic output holds significant value as she pioneered the exploration of personal struggles and taboo subjects, transforming them into art. Sexton's courageous approach opened doors for future generations of poets, empowering them to freely

express their thoughts and experiences without limitations. Maxine Kumin, a close friend and fellow poet, attests to Sexton's impact on women writers, highlighting the influence she had on breaking barriers and reshaping the literary landscape. The labels assigned to the poems in Anne Sexton's "Transformations" are highly commendable as they capture the essence of each poem-story's adaptation of the original fairy tale. Fairy tales themselves are inherently transformative narratives, as emphasized by Haase (2008), highlighting the profound theme of transformation found within them. These tales are replete with instances of miraculous metamorphosis, where characters undergo remarkable changes that shape the course of the narrative. In Sexton's collection, she skillfully harnesses the power of these transformative elements, infusing her poems with the essence of metamorphosis and presenting readers with unique and reimagined versions of familiar fairy tales.

Fairy tales held the same allure for Anne Sexton that the Bible and Greek mythology had for earlier authors. Her use of fairy tales and the poems she writes about them are both distinctive. "went one step further than contemporary poets' translations from languages they did not themselves read but apprehended through a third party. Their poems were *adaptations;* hers were *transformations."*. (Kumin, p. xxviii). Not only is she modernizing the stories' language and content, but she is also repeating them as new stories. She adapts classic fairytales in certain ways, but she also recognizes their innate and enduring power, which she appropriates for social and personal revelation. She is aware of how readers can be fascinated, educated, and moved by fairy tales.

However, each story in a form of a poem has not deviated very much as compared with its original form; the transformation and reiterating of the stories continue to be loyal to Grimm's typical fairy tales. In this book, Anne Sexton explains her poems "I take the fairy tale and transform it into a poem of my own, following the storyline, exceeding the storyline and adding my pzazz. They are very wry and cruel and sadistic and funny." (Middlebrook, 1992, pp.336-337).

Although the poet creates her versions of the Grimms' stories, the original stories' plots have not been much altered. She adopts the same format as the conventional stories and wraps them in her own words, giving the classic stories a sardonic and contemporary twist. A defining

characteristic of Anne Sexton's poetry is transformation, and in this collection, critics see the start of a change in her style. Writing very emotional, introspective poetry that was directly derived from her own experiences occupied a large portion of Anne Sexton's early poems, earning her the moniker 'confessional poet.' Her poems are considered as "outpourings of her individual human experience" and "her intense revision of these outpourings gave them artistic form and structure, and elevated her unique experience to the universal experience of human suffering." (Stack and Lester, 2009, p.264).

However, the poet departs from her poetry in this volume and adopts what has been dubbed the "transpersonal." (Kumin, p. xxx). Zipes (2015) commented on the *Transformation* as being exceptional because the writer could gain attributes due to her complications as she shifted them in a form of a fairy-tale in terms of figure and situation. Her lyrical revision of the fairy tales is an example of a "cultural critique of sex-role stereotyping." (Cucinella, 2002, p. 332). In *Transformations* the narrator is the poet herself "The speaker in this case/is a middle-aged witch, me" (ll.1-2) (Sexton, 1972, p. 3). The person narrating the story of a witch is an intriguing option. However, the writer's option is completely justifiable as the witch is typically and classically depicted in fairy tales as a demonic lady with magical powers, a devilish mediator, and a leading magician. (Purkiss, 2013).

The witch persona in Anne Sexton's poetry, on the other hand, is distinct; her witch is "a desirable version of the self." (Ibid, p.23). She wishes to obtain the witch's power as inoffensive. She can reiterate the stories by articulating powerfully them. Generally speaking, this situation is what today's poet society lacks, whereas man's poetry is the one that is acclaimed of goodness and worthiness to be heard. (Wang, 2005).

Anne Sexton's ability as a storyteller is on full display in Transformations, as is her dark, sardonic sense of humour (Frbes, 2009). The gloomy elements of the fairy tales she conveys in her poetry are usually lightened with satire and humour. This article discusses Anne Sexton's collection named *Transformations*, and how it altered traditional fairy tales. Poems from some of the most well-known fairy tales are reworked into the one chosen for this volume's discussion Cinderella". Since she started, Sexton's style is ironic. Her portrayal of *Cinderella* as she is iconic, beautiful with perfect. Her description of her as inanimate things such as paper, porcelain, and wine refers to her attractiveness. Though mockingly, Sexton ideally displays *Cinderella* as a symbol of faultless attractiveness to imitate her copy in the Grimms' version.

Sexton recollects her plot as the typical tale by presenting the two women as the story's protagonists, the stepmother (evilly) and Cinderella (goodly) setting both characters as opponents. However, Sexton's reiteration suggests that her evil stepmother is similar. Both of them are victimized for being beautiful, which is a concept that is fashioned by a masculine-made society, stating that: Anne Sexton's satire is present from the very first lines. She depicts Cinderella as the epitome of beauty. She uses inanimate elements like paper, china, and wine to depict her stunning beauty, making it difficult to believe that it is genuine. In a sarcastic take on the Grimms' depiction of Cinderella, the poet holds her up as a model of female perfection.

Anne Sexton's adaptation retains the original story's essential structure. She establishes an antagonistic relationship between Cinderella and the stepmother, the two female leads of the story. But she also hints that her unpleasant stepmother is a victim of the beauty illusion generated by male-dominated culture when she says:

Excerpt: 4

> *Beauty is a simple passion,*
> *But, oh my friends, in the end*
> *You will dance the fire dance in iron shoes. (ll.21-23)*

The poet raises a cautionary message about the repercussions faced by women who prioritize external appearances. The wicked stepmother's envy and desire to eliminate Cinderella, who is more beautiful, ultimately result in her downfall. This narrative reflects the conventional "happily ever after" conclusion commonly found in fairy tales. However, the poet introduces a sense of skepticism regarding the plausibility of this outcome. In Anne Sexton's retelling of the Snow White tale, the main plot remains largely intact. Yet, the poem takes a surprising twist in its final line, where the narrator reveals that Cinderella, like the wicked queen, will meet a tragic fate through dancing. Through the phrase "as women do," the poet satirically critiques the societal expectation placed upon women to conform to a patriarchal standard of beauty. The poet's pessimistic perspective suggests that women are inevitably drawn to obsess over their appearance, hoping to defy the passage of time and maintain perpetual beauty.

The original theme in the Brothers Grimm version of the tale emphasizes the idealized qualities of beauty, meekness, and gentleness in women, with the ultimate reward being finding a good husband and living happily ever after. In contrast, Anne Sexton's fairy tale poem takes a

cynical perspective by portraying Cinderella as an idealized symbol of beauty, but with a sense of unnaturalness. Through this portrayal, Sexton aims to deconstruct and challenge the mythological aspects of traditional fairy tales. By de-mythologizing fairy tales, the poet seeks to question and critique the societal ideals and expectations imposed upon women in these narratives. Towards the end of the story, the poet makes it clear that Cinderella is not meant to be seen as a universal role model for women. In the original story, Snow White's value was primarily determined by her physical attractiveness, overlooking other qualities. Despite being portrayed as a desirable beauty, she was depicted as naive. When she finally takes action, she commits the fatal mistake of trusting the same woman who had already made three attempts to kill her. In the poet's depiction, Cinderella is characterized as the "dumb bunny" (line 117), highlighting her lack of discernment and critical thinking skills. This portrayal challenges the notion of Cinderella as a perfect and flawless figure, emphasizing the limitations and flaws in her character.

The poet's critique in the poem "Cinderella" is indeed focused on the female protagonist of the story. Through the perspective of the witch narrator, the poem sheds light on the constrained nature of these heroines within their predetermined gender roles. This portrayal aims to expose the limitations and restrictions imposed upon women in traditional fairy tales. By reimagining Cinderella as a feminist allegory, the poet introduces a groundbreaking perspective that challenges the conventional portrayal of female characters. The poem seeks to empower women and prompt a reevaluation of societal expectations and gender norms.

In the preface of the poem "Cinderella," the narrator sets the stage by introducing four contemporary tales of individuals who have experienced a transformation from poverty to wealth, akin to the Cinderella story. The poem begins with the witch narrator stating, "You always read about it:" (line 1), creating the impression that what follows are ordinary and familiar stories. This approach aims to establish a sense of familiarity and accessibility for the reader, suggesting that these narratives are relatable and relatable to everyday experiences. The narrator, adopting the persona of a witch, proceeds to narrate four tales of individuals who have experienced remarkable upward mobility in their lives. The first story begins with the plumber, a character with twelve children, who unexpectedly wins the Irish Sweepstakes (lines 2-3). The narrator then moves on to recount the story of a nursemaid who manages to capture the heart of

the oldest son (line 8). The tale continues with the milkman's transformation from his original profession to becoming a successful real estate agent (line 14). Lastly, the narrator shares the narrative of a female janitor who happens to be in a bus accident and subsequently receives a significant insurance payout (lines 18-19).

The narratives of the plumber, nursemaid, milkman, and charwoman presented in the poem are intentionally questionable and implausible, mirroring the nature of the Cinderella narrative itself. The poet utilizes satire as a tool to criticize the believability of the Cinderella story right from the beginning. Through the use of satirical remarks, the poem discourages emotional connection or sympathy towards the protagonist. The witch narrator, serving as the voice of the poem, retells the Cinderella tale in a manner that aligns with the traditional version by the Brothers Grimm, but with a satirical twist. Anne Sexton's adaptation maintains the narrative structure of the familiar story while infusing it with a somber tone and dark humour. The poet intends to challenge and deconstruct the idealized and unrealistic aspects of the traditional fairy tale. The narrative begins with Cinderella's mother figure on her deathbed, urging Cinderella to lead a devout and virtuous life to receive her mother's approval from heaven (lines 25-26). The stepmother and stepsisters are then introduced as the primary antagonists in the story, subjecting Cinderella to severe hardships and mistreatment. The stepsisters are described as physically attractive but have hearts as cold and ruthless as blackjacks (lines 28-29). The stepmother's cruelty towards Cinderella is portrayed as something typical, with the poet mockingly remarking, "That is the way with stepmothers" (line 55).

The narrator continues the narrative by describing Cinderella's father's actions. He goes to town and acquires jewels and gowns for his wife and stepdaughters, but all he brings back for Cinderella is a simple twig (branch) (implying neglect or indifference towards her).

Excerpt: 5

> *"She planted that twig on her mother's grave"*
> *"and it grew to a tree where a white dove sat".*
> *"Whenever she wished for anything the dove"*
> *"would drop it like an egg upon the ground".*
> *"The bird is important, my dears, so heed him". (ll.36-40)*

The poet presents a cynical perspective on the role of the avian creature and its supposedly magical aid to Cinderella. The avian creature is depicted as having the power to grant wishes and fulfill desires, symbolized by its ability to lay an egg. Through the use of satire, the

narrator prompts the audience to consider the significance of magic and fantasy in the story, highlighting the exaggerated nature of these elements. This suggests that the world of fairy tales is fictional and unlikely to occur in real life, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging this distinction. Following this, a significant event takes place that can be seen as a turning point in the story - the party.

Excerpt: 6

*"Next came the ball, as you all know".*

*"It was a marriage market".*

*"The prince was looking for a wife".*

*"All but Cinderella were preparing"*

*"and gussying up for the big event". (ll.41-45)*

The poet uses the phrase "as you all know" to downplay the significance of this event as if it were a mundane and unimportant affair. Furthermore, the author employs satire to portray the prince's ball as a marketplace for finding a suitable spouse, where the prince is expected to choose a partner. Despite Cinderella's expressed desire to attend the party and her pleas to be allowed to go, she faces obstacles due to the interference of her malicious stepmother. As expected, Cinderella receives supernatural assistance from a dove perched on the tree above her late mother's grave. The poet employs a sardonic tone in describing this event.

Excerpt: 6

*"Cinderella went to the tree at the grave"*

*"and cried forth like a gospel singer":*

*"Mama! Mama! My turtledove",*

*"send me to the prince's ball!" (ll.56-59)*

Indeed, the poet humorously highlights the implausibility of the story by noting that the bird drops down a golden dress and a delicate little gold slipper, which seems quite extravagant for a simple bird. The poet sarcastically remarks that it is "Rather a large package for a simple bird." However, it comes as no surprise that Cinderella attended the event, given the magical assistance she received. At the ball, Cinderella's true beauty captivates the prince, leading to an immediate romantic attraction between them. Unfortunately, Cinderella is forced to leave the event, and despite the prince's attempts over three evenings, he fails to locate her. This prompts him to take further action in pursuit of finding her.

Excerpt: 7

> "*covered the palace steps with cobbler's wax*"
>
> "*and Cinderella's gold shoe stuck upon it.*"
>
> "*Now he would find whom the shoe fit*"
>
> "*and find his strange dancing girl for keeps*". (ll.75-78)

The poem "Cinderella," a fairy tale, exhibits a higher level of gruesomeness when compared to the Brothers Grimm's version of the story. The poet emphasizes the dark and ominous aspects of the narrative, particularly when the step-sisters subject themselves to gratuitous bodily agony in their attempts to fit into the slipper. The narrator, who takes on the role of a witch, mocks the sisters' violent actions, especially the first-born sister, comparing her big toe to a source of amusement: "...got in the way so she simply/sliced it off and put on the slipper" (lines 82-83), while "The other sister cut off her heel" (line 88). Additionally, the poet adopts a facetious tone to criticize the prince, who, being cautious, "...began to feel like a shoe salesman" (line 91).

Excerpt: 8

Finally,

> "*[...] he gave it one last try.*"
>
> "*This time Cinderella fit into the shoe*"
>
> "*like a love letter into its envelope*". (ll.92-94)

In the narrative, the union between the prince and Cinderella is solemnized, and during the wedding ceremony, the malevolent stepsisters face retribution, as depicted in the following verses:

Excerpt: 9

> "*At the wedding ceremony*"
>
> "*the two sisters came to curry favor*"
>
> *and the white dove pecked their eyes out.*
>
> "*Two hollow spots were left*"
>
> "*like soup spoons*". (ll.95-99)

Anne Sexton's poem based on a fairy tale explores themes of violence, gore, and despair to a notable extent. The malevolent siblings endure a harsh and fitting punishment. While the conventional fairy tale typically concludes with the wedding of Cinderella and the prince, the poet infuses the familiar story with a fresh perspective.

The poet skillfully incorporates contemporary elements into the traditional Grimm's fairy tale, giving it a modern touch. In the prologue of the poem, the poet makes references to the

fashion brand Dior and the department store Bonwit Teller. Furthermore, in the poet's portrayal of Cinderella, it is mentioned that she slept on the sooty hearth each night and appeared to resemble Al Jolson (lines 31-32). This comparison draws attention to Cinderella's face being covered in ash, resembling the blackface makeup famously worn by Al Jolson, a renowned performer. Additionally, the poet suggests that the prince experienced a sense of occupational confusion, similar to that of a shoe salesman, due to his weariness from traveling long distances in search of the rightful owner of the shoe. The final stanza of the poem presents a striking and notable metamorphosis. While the original narrative traditionally portrays Cinderella entering into a blissful marriage and living happily ever after, Anne Sexton subverts this conventional ending in her fairy-tale poem.

Excerpt: 10

> *"Cinderella and the Prince"*
> *"lived, they say, happily ever after,"*
> *"like two dolls in a museum case"*
> *"never bothered by diapers or dust",*
> *"never arguing over the timing of an egg",*
> *"never telling the same story twice",*
> *"never getting a middle-aged spread",*
> *"their darling smiles pasted on for eternity".*
> *"Regular Bobbsey Twins".*
> *"That story". (ll.100-109)*

The poet's approach challenges the preconceived notions of the readers. In the poem, the characters of Cinderella and the Prince are depicted as figurines confined within a museum display case, which imbues them with a sense of artificiality and lack of authenticity. Instead of being portrayed as living, breathing individuals, they are presented as mere dolls. They are depicted without a permanent residence, devoid of disagreements, unaffected by the passage of time, and shielded from the hardships and complexities of life. Consequently, these characters are effectively insulated and separated from the realities of existence, making them as fictional as the narrative of a fairy tale.

Anne Sexton delves into the unexplored aspects of the unique fairy tale, particularly focusing on the post-marital life of Cinderella and the prince. In doing so, she criticizes the traditional conclusion, emphasizing that real life does not conform to fairy tale conventions, and the idea of

a blissful ending is nonexistent. The poet challenges the prevailing belief that a woman's marriage, especially to a prince, will solve all her problems. The institution of marriage does not guarantee happiness and can potentially introduce its own set of challenges and difficulties. However, it is through these very obstacles that life gains depth and significance. The author finds the conclusion of the fairy tale implausible and employs a metaphorical comparison between the concept of happily-ever-after and a sterile, monotonous glass enclosure. The poet employs the repeated phrase "That story" to emphasize their intention of subverting the misleading assurances commonly found in fairy tales. The objective is to urge the audience to recognize the fictional nature of the narrative. The author underscores the idea that the story at hand, much like the four other accounts mentioned in the initial four stanzas, is implausible, existing solely as works of fiction. The repetition serves to reinforce the notion that fairy tales present unrealistic scenarios and should not be mistaken for real-life experiences.

The poet ridicules the implicit message conveyed by the narrative that a woman's happiness is dependent on her physical beauty. The fairy tale establishes a standard of beauty for women that encompasses physical attractiveness, purity, piety, and subservience. However, Cinderella is portrayed as possessing inner beauty, in contrast to her stepsisters who lack such qualities, being described as "pretty enough but with hearts like blackjacks" (lines 28-29). In the traditional narrative, Cinderella's struggles revolve entirely around the revelation of her true physical beauty at the ball, which leads to the prince becoming enamoured with her and their subsequent marriage. According to the fairy tale, the couple then experiences everlasting happiness, seemingly immune to any potential disruptions to their idealized state. The poet critiques this notion and challenges the idea that a woman's worth and happiness should be determined solely by her physical appearance.

It is important to clarify that the poem challenges the notion that a woman's happiness is contingent upon her physical appearance and conformity to societal beauty standards. The poet presents a somber perspective on women's liberation, particularly focusing on the authentic experiences of women during the 1950s and 1960s (Zipes, 2015, p.461). The poem highlights the societal pressure placed on women to conform to beauty standards but does so to critique and subvert these expectations.

Additionally, the poet emphasizes the absence of a positive influence from Cinderella's father. The character is introduced at the beginning of the narrative as a wealthy widower with a daughter named Cinderella. However, he remarries and subsequently shows a lack of attentiveness towards his child, allowing her to endure mistreatment from her stepmother and stepsisters. As the fairy tale progresses, the character of Cinderella's father becomes conspicuously absent, indicating a lack of involvement in her life. The absence of a positive paternal figure is depicted in the story of Cinderella, further adding to the challenges she faces.

Anne Sexton indeed maintains the narrative structure of the traditional story while introducing a significant departure in its denouement. The alteration of the narrative's conclusion is particularly notable. In her poem, Sexton provides a fresh perspective on the story of Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty), where the protagonist herself takes on the role of the narrator, recounting her tale. Moreover, the narrative expands to depict the events that unfold after the supposed idyllic conclusion of the original fairy tale. This expansion allows for a deeper exploration of the character's journey and the complexities that arise beyond the traditional happily-ever-after.

Indeed, in the original narrative, the protagonist of Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty) is often portrayed as a symbol of aesthetic beauty, with considerable emphasis placed on her physical appearance. However, Anne Sexton shifts the focus to Briar Rose's individuality in her poem. The poet draws attention to the unsettling aspects that were often overlooked in the primary narrative, including the consequences of the protagonist's century-long slumber, her compliance and submissiveness, and the gradual erosion of her sense of self due to societal expectations and predetermined gender roles. Sexton's exploration delves into the complexities and implications of these aspects, shedding light on the profound impact they have on the character's identity.

Furthermore, in the Grimms' rendition, the protagonist, Briar Rose, is portrayed as inert, spending her existence in slumber and communicating sparingly, only uttering a few brief phrases. She is depicted as a passive archetype, lacking agency and control over her destiny. However, in the fairy-tale poem, Anne Sexton grants Briar Rose a voice. After her awakening, Briar Rose transforms and learns to assert herself, ultimately taking charge of her fate. The poet highlights this shift by emphasizing Briar Rose's ability to "talk again" (line 10) and her newfound ability to speak "with the gift of tongues" (line 6). Sexton's portrayal challenges the

outdated passive archetype, allowing Briar Rose to reclaim her agency and assert herself in the narrative.

The denouement of the narrative indeed deviates significantly from the conventional happily-ever-after resolution typically found in the archetypal Grimms' tale. In this version, Briar Rose is portrayed as being confined, not in a physical prison, but rather in a state of suspended animation. The modernization of the poem becomes evident through the inclusion of references to contemporary inventions, which transforms the work. Additionally, the poet incorporates various references to modern consumer goods such as handbags, beverage straws, tobacco items, and erasers made of rubber. There are also allusions to instruments used for securing objects, a cleansing solution, electrical shock devices, and a regional anesthetic called Novocain. By introducing these elements, the poet engages in a process of deconstructing the mythological aspects present in the narrative. This is achieved through the explicit indication that the temporal setting of the tale is not a vague and timeless "once upon a time," but rather the poet's modern era, specifically identified as the 1970s.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, Anne Sexton's reimagining of fairy tales serves as a vehicle for her feminist ideology, presenting them from a uniquely female perspective and employing satire to critique the patriarchal themes found in the Grimms' fairy tales. Sexton uses fairy tales as a medium to express her feminist viewpoints and challenge the societal expectations imposed on women. She provides insightful analysis of the psychological implications embedded in the original tales, offering a valuable resource for female characters confined by gender roles. The poet's objective is not to empower female protagonists but to reveal the implicit messages directed at women within the classical narratives. Historical norms have imposed expectations of gentleness, docility, reticence, and timidity on women. The Grimms' fairy tales reinforce the idea of women's dependence on men and their inability to thrive without male support. The poet's prologues, characterized by cynicism, and concluding stanzas, marked by unexpectedness, along with Sexton's incisive satire and somber wit, undermine the assurances of traditional fairy tales. She explicitly conveys that these tales are fictional and their conclusions overly idealistic. Sexton's works expose the disparity between fictional narratives and reality, urging readers to reevaluate important social issues such as women's liberation and their meaningful contributions to society.

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