CINDERELLA: The Oldest Story Ever Told
(Background for Teachers)

The Cinderella story is one of the best-known and best-loved fairy tales in Western culture. Like many folk tales, the origins of Cinderella can be traced back many centuries, and individual elements of the story are found in almost every corner of the world. Folklorists estimate that at least 1,500 variations on the theme of Cinderella have been found worldwide.

The earliest written versions of Cinderella hail from ninth century China, where a tiny foot was the mark of extraordinary virtue, beauty and distinction; but a version of the story dates back to the Pharaohs of ancient Egypt. In the Bible, brothers Cain and Able or Esau and Jacob are examples of two siblings, one of whom oppresses or destroys the other. In Germany, tales were told of the “ash-boy” who is forced to live among the ashes until eventually he becomes king. In our play, one of the “Cinderella” characters is also portrayed as a boy.

Education has always been as important as entertainment in the tradition of storytelling. Many “fairy” tales are actually “cautionary” tales that were used to teach young people the dangers of the world and how to protect themselves, physically and emotionally. Bruno Bettelheim, one of the great interpreters of the psychological roots of fairy tales, commented that the Cinderella tale is unrivaled as an expression of child’s sense of being bullied, intimidated, or simply outdone by its elders. As a cautionary tale, Cinderella offers the child hope that eventually she will be delivered from her misery, and that hidden under her rags, her true merit will somehow be discovered.

When Charles Perrault wrote his famous version of Cinderella for the 1697 volume Contes de ma mère l’oye (Tales of My Mother Goose), he created a very different tale from those told by earlier storytellers. He removed everything he felt would be objectionable to members of the royal court of Louis XIV, his intended audience; and he invented a great many details that today form the most popular elements of the story.

Gone are tales of murder and revenge that populate many of the early Cinderella stories. Gone are tales of a dead mother’s reincarnation as a fish or other animal. Gone are story endings with less than happy
outcomes. In their place are new elements, including the famous glass slipper, the first of its kind. No one had ever before told of a slipper of glass. Gold, yes; silver, yes; even silk; but never glass. In Perrault’s version, a Fairy Godmother bestows a gown and other gifts on Cinderella, while in earlier versions of the tale the givers are usually animals or their spirits. The gown’s transformation back to rags at the last stroke of midnight is another invention. Even the pumpkin made into a coach and the mice turned into horses are Perrault conceits. But all have come together to form the version of the story that we now know best.

In CINDERELLA: The Oldest Story Ever Told, we will look at three versions of this tale from contrasting cultural traditions. Together we will follow three very different young people on their adventures toward adulthood: Yeh-Hsien of China, whose mother died and whose father has remarried; Sindela of Africa, the daughter of the second wife of a rich farmer; and Changez, a poor boy in India whose job it is to watch over his stepmother’s cow. All of the familiar elements of the story are here, but with highly theatrical variations, using puppets and masks to represent the varying cultures.

The setting for these three stories is “in ancient times,” and their location is “wherever the wind blows.” As the theme song from the play tells us:

“This is the oldest story ever told
This is the oldest story ever told
In every place in every land
All around the globe
This is the oldest story ever told.”

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Lee Kopp, Director of ArtSPARK