The History & Significance of Fairy Tales  
Teacher Background Material

Once upon a time... fairy tales weren’t written for children. Their origins date back thousands of years. Despite their name, the popular fairy tales usually have little to do with fairies – they often contain fantasy creatures such as goblins, elves, trolls, witches, giants, and/or talking animals. It is not necessary, though, for these tales to be about fairies. The name “fairy tale” was taken from the English translation of 'conte de fées', the name that the French writer Madame d'Aulnoy gave to the tales she and her contemporaries wrote in 17th century Paris – which featured far more fairies than the tales which are best known today. These French literary fairy tales of the 17th century, mostly written by women, have all but vanished from view. Some scholars prefer to use the German term 'wundermärchen', which can be translated as 'wonder tales'. Enchantments and far-fetched events are also usually part of the plot of these tales. Unlike legends and folklore tales, they seldom contain any references to religion, actual places, persons or events. The term "once upon a time" is used rather than an actual reference to date.

The oral tradition of the fairy tale came long before the written page. Tales were told or enacted dramatically, rather than written down – passed along from generation to generation. The first known fairy tales are from ancient Egypt and occurred around 1300 BC. The similarity in tales from different regions and cultures speaks to the common human experience – many cultures over time, tell similar tales of similar human experiences. Throughout history, fairy tales have been women’s stories, passed down orally by mothers and grandmothers. When fairy tales began to emerge as a literary form, there were far more such tales written by female authors than written by male authors. Many of the stories were edited and changed as they were written down, removing the darker and more gruesome elements of the stories.

Today, when asked to name authors of fairy tales, most will answer the Grimm brothers, or perhaps Hans Christian Andersen. The brothers Grimm collected their tales from peasants, and edited them to suit their audience. The Grimm brothers saw that the tales bewitched young readers and started rewriting them to become softer, sweeter, with more explicit morals. All of the polishing, however, never
rubbed away the solid heart of the stories – read and loved in over 160 languages.

Danish author and poet Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales have been translated into well over 100 languages, and continue to be published in millions of copies all over the world. As a young boy, Andersen displayed great intelligence and imagination, a trait fostered by the indulgence of his parents, and by the superstitions of his mother. The great difference between Andersen and the brothers Grimm is the fact that, while the Grimm brothers gathered their tales from the endless source of existing folklore, Andersen’s tales were all original creations.

Fairy tales have continued to influence writers and to be retold, reimagined, and re-invented by writers to the present day. Each time fairy tales are revised and retold, they are given a new slant by a new writer. The fact that, originally, fairy tales were so often enacted dramatically by the storyteller made them ripe for modern storytelling vehicles. The advent of motion pictures meant that such stories could be presented with full effect – images, voices, music and illustration could all be combined to bring the stories to life. The Disney movie Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, made in 1937, was a groundbreaking film for fairy tales, and indeed, for fantasy in general. Disney’s influence helped establish this as a genre for children’s movies. Of course, Walt Disney took many liberties with the re-telling of this and other fairy tales from their original form. With the popularity and widespread distribution of Disney movies, these vehicles are often the first (and sometimes the only) exposure that children have to some of these stories, and they assume that Disney is the source of these stories, rather than one of many adaptors.

Fairy tales should not be discounted as simply children’s stories that fade away from memory when we grow out of childhood. For thousands of years, they have played an important role in our lives. Fairy tales show children that life can be full of hazards, but if they keep their courage and hold fast to what they believe in, they can persevere. They show that frightening things can happen but, with strong inner qualities, anyone can win through. Fairy tales give hope to children that, whatever early difficulties they might encounter, they can do better later on. The happy endings give children belief in their own future. Fairy tales nurture young children’s imaginations and foster their creativity. They teach morals like respect, compassion and
endurance. Fairy tales are against materialism and unearned celebrity – they can help children to be inspired by a wider variety of worthwhile professions. Fairy tale heroes are compassionate and courteous – they are not spiteful, malicious or vindictive. They care about and are close to birds and animals. They pursue activities linked to the natural world, increasing children’s interest in the planet, fostering a will to protect it, and empowering them to rely on their own personal resources, rather than modern conveniences or gadgets.

The ancient tales have their own lives, each with unique, eccentric qualities. Part of the richness of the fairy tale tradition is that the same story will have different lessons for each person who listens. Opening ourselves to the greater significance of familiar stories requires a certain tenderness of spirit. The notions will be fragile at first. We must hold them gently for a time, until they deliver their message to us. The effects of what we learn might well last a lifetime.

--Karen Altree Piemme
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