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REPRESENTATION OF CULTURAL TROPES AND FEMININITY IN GRIMM BROTHERS'
FAIRY TALES

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Abstract

This literary analysis examines the Grimm Brothers' versions of *Cinderella*, *Rapunzel*, and *Snow White* to explore how nineteenth century German cultural values were reflected and reinforced through fairy tales. By analysing the motifs written within the original tales, I aim to identify how impactful the representations of cultural values of femininity, witches, and religion through the Grimm fairy tales were and how their presence supports the historical and cultural ideology that was prevalent in their century. This study investigates how these narratives shaped social expectations for women and children through characterization, moral consequences, and the contrast between physical beauty and inner virtue. The Grimm Brothers constructed clear distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable femininity that reflected broader social and religious ideologies in Germany with specific mention of contrast between passive protagonists and ambitious antagonists, as well as the role of Protestant moral values in shaping themes of suffering, punishment, and redemption. Furthermore, this analysis considers how the widespread popularity and social acceptance of these tales contributed to the confirmation of cultural norms and expectations among young audiences, particularly girls. Although these stories continue to remain *sehr bekannt* (very well known) to this day with many adaptations, their original narratives preserve the gender expectations and moral structures of the society in which they were created. Consequently, this analysis highlights how fairy tales continue to offer a lens into the past of what life was like for young women, children, and *Das Volk*¹.

¹ A term coined by Johan Gottfried Herder, (the people), regards the common German citizen

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Introduction

The first story I can remember being told by my mother wasn't one with a happy ending, instead the bedtime story ended in a blaze. Don't play with matches, or you'll burn up in flames. Later that day, I found all the matches in my house, gathered them into a pile, and threw them in the trash out of fear. This story came from a collection of stories named *Struwwelpeter* by Heinrich Hoffmann. This publication was one of many in Germany that parents used to direct their children's actions and morals. In a German household, it is common to hear frightening stories that lead children to "correct" behaviors and toward obeying their parents. This is done intentionally and shaped through historical German cultural values (Perry, 2019). Not only did these stories shape behaviors, but they also shaped objective views on society. This project argues that social views concerning female beauty standards, the impact of religion, and the idea of good women versus bad women at the time of publication can be seen throughout the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, such as *Rapunzel*, *Cinderella*, and *Snow White*. These stories reflect the rich era of change and social expectations of their time through motifs and plots that are still prevalent to this day.

Fairy tales are often imagined as stories of princesses, magical helpers, and happily ever afters, where lost young women are guided safely toward love and fulfillment. The Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, however, present a far darker world filled with punishment and bodily sacrifice, including poisonings, vengeful animals, and the mutilation of women's bodies in the pursuit of marriage. Collected and published in the early nineteenth century, these stories originated as oral folktales shared within local communities before being transcribed and circulated more widely by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Centered almost exclusively on young female protagonists, these narratives offer insight into historical beliefs about womanhood,

morality, and what it meant to be a “good” or successful person within their cultural contexts. During the creation of the Grimm fairy tales, the public and intellectual cultures of Germany were shifting from Enlightenment reason to Romanticism, which included a privileging of emotions, folklore, and the *Volkgeist* (Common spirit) of Germany (Biscay, 2023). The ideology of the time was symbolized through motifs such as marriage, social mobility, and the idea of a “happily ever after,” sentiments that were ultimately captured in an everlasting time capsule of folk tales. These stories also served as cautionary tales for young readers, and shaped behavior by reinforcing what was considered socially acceptable. Through repeated exposure, parents used these often violent narratives to guide children’s actions and moral development. They would be told as stories in schools and at home before bed which can still be observed to this day, such as when I grew up (Blamires, 2009). In German children's stories, the protagonist is told not to do something specifically by their guardians and they ignore all caution, completing the action anyway. After disobeying their parents or the rules, they face grand consequences, which often end with death or total destruction. The Grimm Brothers compiled these oral narratives and compiled a book of cautionary tales named *Kinder und Hausmärchen*².

Historical and Cultural Influence

When published in 1812, the stories of the Grimm Brothers were not only successful in entertaining the public, but they also told the story of many German households. The narratives highlighted the socially acceptable German woman, who was to tend to the house, obey their husband, and provide a future by bearing children (Bridenthal et al., 1984). This is clearly shown throughout each and every fairy tale composed within the first edition of *Kinder und Hausmärchen*. Germany in this time was not a united nation, but rather an abundance of territories in Europe (Zipes, 1988). These territories were held by Napoleon Bonaparte, a French

² Children and House Stories (unless otherwise noted, all translations from German to English are my own).

military general who rose to power during the French Revolution in 1799. During this time period, these territories were governed by both class and gender, with men dominating the social life and governments while women were expected to tend to the home. Upper class women usually were trained to the extent of art; piano, harp and singing, needlework, fancy embroidery and quilting, and expected to be a moral support for their husbands and children (Quataert, 2001). Many of these attributes are showcased in the Grimm fairy tales by way of women who sing, clean their houses, and focus on finding a husband. Working class women, although still expected to take care of house duties, shared in the economic responsibilities of men. They took part in small scale crafts, agricultural work, and any labor contributions that remained legally and socially subordinate to their male counterparts. During this time, women had no political rights as they could not vote, hold office, or participate formally in governance. Since these societies were largely based on Protestant and Catholic traditions, divorce was hardly obtained and the custody of children was favored to the fathers. Although life within this time was highly structured, the kingdoms and city states of these German territories were not immune to change brought about by the Romanticism era (1795-1830). National identity and celebration of emotion and nature were high through this period, but these ideals that expanded freedoms rarely translated for women (Ferber, 2010).

Romanticism was both a reaction against the Enlightenment and a response to the political and social changes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including industrialization and the aftermath of the French Revolution (Ferber, 2010). Romantic thinkers emphasized emotion, imagination, folklore, and the spiritual connection between humanity and nature. These ideas are prevalent throughout the Grimm fairy tales, as princesses and other characters are often aided by animals, forests, and natural elements during moments of danger or

hardship. As industrialization increasingly transformed and cleared natural landscapes, Romanticism developed a sense of nostalgia for nature and traditional life. This nostalgia is reflected throughout the Grimm stories, where forests symbolize protection, transformation, divine intervention, emotional connection, and cultural identity (Hacken, 2008).

Living conditions within the German territories at this time were heavily shaped by extensive forests and wooded hills, which became defining features of the Central European landscape and everyday life. In the years following the publication of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, modernization and expanding agricultural settlement gradually reduced many of these heavily wooded areas. However, the cultural and emotional significance of the forests continued to live on within the fairy tales themselves. This preservation of the woods through storytelling reflects Romantic ideals that longed for what was natural, traditional, and increasingly threatened by industrial progress (Ferber, 2010).

Within many Grimm fairy tales, the woods are also portrayed as dangerous and unpredictable places. Characters who wander too far into the forest often encounter violence, temptation, isolation, or moral trials. These portrayals fortified cautionary lessons for young readers and warned against straying too far from the safety of home and social order (Perry, 2019; Zipes, 1988). At the same time, this moral framing reflects the strong influence of Lutheranism in early nineteenth century Germany; religion played a significant role in shaping behavior, discipline, and family values (Parr, 2023). Through these narratives, children were not only warned about physical dangers, but were also guided toward obedience, morality, and personal responsibility in accordance with the cultural expectations of the period.

Long before the Grimm Brothers published their famous fairy tales the *Aufklärung*, or Enlightenment, spread throughout Germany and introduced new ways of thinking. This period

emphasized reason, individual freedom, wisdom, and moral development as the country and world moved into a more pensive era. Influential philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe helped shape new ideas about society, morality, and human behavior during this intellectual movement. As Enlightenment ideals gradually blended into the emerging Romantic movement, thinkers began placing greater value on emotion, folklore, nature, and national identity. Johann Gottfried Herder became especially influential during this transition through his concept of “*das Volk*,” which emphasized the importance of common people, suggesting that true German culture came from everyday citizens rather than the elite. According to Herder, those who worked on farms, in rural areas, and in the countryside represented the true essence of German identity, a view that elevated the importance of common people and was widely upheld (McLaughlan, 2024).

Although the Grimm Brothers’ tales still reflect traditional gender roles, they also show the influence of Enlightenment thinking. Many of the stories portray young women overcoming oppression from figures such as stepmothers and ultimately achieving a better life, reinforcing both Protestant values and the idea of a “happily ever after”, won through personal exertion and efforts. This reflects the Enlightenment belief in personal growth and the idea that individuals can improve their circumstances through virtuous and moral action, often symbolized through happy marriage and good deeds.

Rather than completely breaking from traditional ideals, the Grimm Brothers’ fairy tales illustrate how the Enlightenment and Romanticism ideology was integrated within preexisting religious and cultural frameworks that affected story telling of the time. Although these stories emphasized moral development, perseverance, and the possibility of improved circumstances, they did so within boundaries that maintained traditional gender expectations. As a result

Rapunzel, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella* reflect a cultural movement in which emerging ideas about individual growth coexist with enduring structures of obedience, virtue, and social constraints, especially for women.

Methods

This capstone project uses a qualitative literary analysis to highlight the portrayal of female protagonists in the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales. This study focused on interpreting how historical context, culture, and motifs came together to develop themes, character development, and cultural meaning that entertains youth to this day. The goal of this approach is to understand how representations of women reflect the social and cultural values of the time periods in which the stories were created and had spread throughout the public.

The primary materials for this analysis include the Grimm Brothers' original fairy tales, specifically *Aschenputtel* (Cinderella), *Rapunzel* (Rapunzel), and *SneeWitchen* (Snow White), as well as selected modern literary adaptations which will be referenced in the appendix. These texts were chosen because they represent a range of time periods and cultural perspectives, allowing for a direct comparison of how female characters are portrayed across different historical contexts while also keeping the underlying, moral story and tropes alive.

The analysis focuses on several key elements within each text, including characterization, moral expectations, beauty standards, and the level of agency given to female protagonists and portrayed by femininity, witches, and religion. Special attention is paid to how these elements relate to broader cultural influences, such as Enlightenment ideas of moral development, religious values emphasizing discipline and obedience, and societal expectations surrounding women's roles. By examining these elements, this study aims to outline the cultural nuances hidden within the nineteenth century children's fairy tales that still impact children's

entertainment to this day.

The procedure for this study involved close reading of each text available to University of California, Riverside regarding the Grimm Brothers and stretching beyond that of UCR into family owned editions of sources. Identifying recurring themes and patterns related to the portrayal of women helped shape the information presented within this capstone and supported the idea that these stories are direct lenses into the past by way of culture. Each story was analyzed individually to understand its historical and cultural context, including the values it promotes and the behaviors it rewards or punishes. Then, texts were cross referenced with historical facts to be able to identify the source of societal beauty, femininity, marriage, and religion. These comparisons allowed for a clearer understanding of the underlying tones and ideology present through these nineteenth century fairy tales.

This method is appropriate for the project because literary analysis allows for an in depth examination of cultural meaning and representation through a multitude of literary works. By comparing multiple versions of similar narratives across different time periods, this approach makes it possible to trace how broader cultural, religious, and philosophical influences have shaped the portrayal of women in fairy tales. Ultimately, this provides insight into how storytelling both reflects and reinforces societal expectations, particularly in relation to gender and identity. This project is additionally informed through approaches within gender studies and literary criticism, particularly regarding the construction of femininity, female monstrosity, and the opposition between virtuous and deviant women in fairy tale narratives (Drah, 2020).

Rapunzel

Rapunzel is a perfect example of the culture of 1812 coming to life. The Grimm Brothers' original story begins with a husband and his wife, the wife is severely ill and calls for a special

type of cabbage that was growing in their neighbor's yard. She gives into her greed when she asks her husband to climb over their fence and fetch the delicious rapunzel³ that she is craving. When caught climbing over the wall into their neighbor's yard, the man is confronted by an enchantress that demands payment in the form of their unborn child for his thievery. In fear, the husband agrees to trading their daughter as punishment for their selfish actions. This sentiment reflects the morals of this time. Not only was she punished for her greed, but so were her daughter and husband. Gluttony, stealing, and disregard for the property of others lead to the confinement of their daughter. These actions were not acceptable during the time of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales as they went against religious teaching. According to Protestant values, greed was especially sinful and women were seen to be more susceptible to participating in these actions. Here young audiences observe why one should not steal, or be selfish as their actions may lead to grave consequences for themselves and their families.

Once their daughter is born, the enchantress names her Rapunzel and conceals her away from society in a tower buried in the woods. The tower contains no doors or ladders, just a window where the beautiful and young Rapunzel may let down her hair to allow entrance for whoever calls upon her. She spends her days with the enchantress alone and sings out into the forest to pass time. One day, the king's son was traveling through the dense forest, when he heard a beautiful song ringing through the trees. The prince stopped, listened to the melody, and was compelled to return each day to listen to Rapunzel sing.

Here, Enlightenment ideals make an appearance through *Rapunzel* and her beautiful song which catches the attention of a high class man who will later fall in love with her. This also pertains to a successful life, such as marrying into a class that is higher than the women's own or a common girl marrying a prince. This establishes the precedent that to be an attractive and

³ Type of cabbage

desirable woman, she must hold certain abilities like singing to actualize a good life⁴. He then calls out to her, asking for entrance into her tower, and the two meet. This is exactly what the enchantress was isolating Rapunzel from, the outside world which carries opportunities for marriage and escape from her magical control. The prince sees Rapunzel, and her beauty, and promptly offers to marry her.

What strengthens the feminine expectations of this period is his proposal solely based on her lovely voice and beautiful appearance cementing the ideology regarding the musical arts and their attractiveness. The idea of Rapunzel being isolated within a tower and guarded by a controlling witch figure while the prince freely roams the woods as he pleases mirrors the gender expectations of the time. Women, especially unmarried ones, were constrained by consequences that would affect them if they had not lived within their assigned roles. In contrast, men were free to have mobility and exercise choice, reflecting power structures rooted by gendered patriarchy.

When her evil caretaker hears of her interaction with the prince, she cuts off Rapunzel's hair, which sends the prince tumbling over the tower window into bushes that scratch his eyes out. The enchantress states,

"Die Katze hat sie geholt und wird dir auch die Augen auskratzen!"

"The cat has got her, and will scratch out your eyes as well!"

The enchantress referencing a cat to scratch out the princess' eyes may be a correlation with the witch's familiar in the figure of the cat, or of night time spirits. This connection with ,“a familiar or imp: an animal-shaped demon in the form of a black cat or a brown dog” (Pavlac, 2009) was known in society to signal a connection with the devil. This often was an indication of sorcery or a witch's work. The connotation prevalent to witches would have frightened young

⁴ Later adaptations of Rapunzel show her artcraft of painting.

readers and revealed a connection between the story and “the somewhat recent history of witch hunting and burning in medieval Europe” (Pavlac, 2009). The cat, or thorns that ultimately harm him, cause the prince to go blind and seemingly lose his chance of finding his new wife.

The blinding of the prince can be interpreted as a punishment for lust, class transgression, and even the violation of Rapunzel’s virginity. His actions, framed as sinful, lead to his exile into the wilderness, where he wanders in misery and isolation. His suffering mirrors the concept of penitence, as he is forced to endure the consequences of his behavior before redemption becomes possible. Only after this period of hardship, inflicted through the intervention of a figure symbolically aligned with the devil, does he reunite with Rapunzel and discover their children, who were born during her banishment in the desert.

These ideas fortify a broader Christian moral framework, particularly Protestant, Lutheran influenced beliefs about the necessity of discipline and repentance of sin. After his punishment, the prince is cast into a period of wandering through the wilderness, a motif that reflects the trope of repentance in which suffering and isolation, often symbolized through the desert, serve as a necessary step toward redemption. While this pattern of sin, suffering, and restoration exists across Protestant and Catholic traditions, the emphasis on personal suffering and internal transformation aligns more closely with Protestant moral ideology. His blindness and exile function not only as physical consequences, but as moral ones, forcing him to atone before he is worthy to be saved. Only after enduring suffering does he reunite with Rapunzel and his children, whose tears restore his sight.

In the narrative, Rapunzel fulfills her role as an ideal woman, acting as a source of moral and emotional healing for her husband. Specifically, she does not heal him through authority of the situation or action, but through a passive, empathetic expression of care. This upholds the

expectation that a woman's virtue lies in her nurturing and supportive nature. She symbolizes what young girls should strive to become when becoming or searching for a "good" woman, wife, or mother within the era's cultural framework.

The resolution of the story symbolizes the idea of a "happily ever after" in this time period. Rapunzel marries the prince, transcending her class position and escaping the evil grasp of the enchantress who loses her authority over a young beautiful girl. Ultimately, Rapunzel becomes situated within the patriarchal structure in which she is transferred from the control of a female authority to that of a male. Her return to society and successful marriage serve as a reward for her obedience, suffering, and moral purity, repenting for the greed of her mother. This conclusion highlights the idea that marriage functions both as a moral and social resolution, reflecting a culture in which a woman's security, legitimacy, and identity were closely tied to her attachment to a husband.

Snow White

Within the same publication, the Grimm Brothers also portray the story of *Snow White* within their fairy tales. *Snee Wittchen*⁵ centers on beauty, obedience, and punishment as it particularly relates to women. The story begins with a queen who wishes for a beautiful daughter as white as snow, as red as blood, and black as ebony. This wish comes true with the birth of her daughter Snow White. After the tragic death of the queen, the king would take another woman as his wife,

"She was a beautiful woman, but she was proud and arrogant..." (Grimm 1812).

⁵ Snow White

The new queen is introduced in such a way that signals she will be trouble as the trope of step mothers⁶, arrogant, and women with agency are not to be trusted. Frequently, the queen would ask a magical mirror,

“Spieglein, Spieglein an der Wand,
wer ist die schönste im ganzen Land" (Grimm 1812).

“Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest in the whole land”

The mirror would answer that she indeed was the fairest in the land until one day when Snow White was just seven years old, the queen asked her beloved mirror her favorite question only to receive a response that Snow White was now a thousand times fairer than she. She was so jealous and filled with envy that she ordered a huntsman to take her step child into the woods and cut out her liver and lungs.

These actions confirm the evil nature of not only step mothers, but women with their own independent agency. Caitlin Hewitt-White argues that the stories shift blame from the father to the step mother to imply that the only authentic mother is that of biological relation, emphasizing that family bonds of blood are more significant than theoretical love (Hewitt-White, 2003). In this way the step mother of Snow White is constructed as inherently deviant, not simply by her actions, but because she represents a nonbiological maternal figure that challenges traditional family structures.

The queen's overwhelming vanity and greed for beauty aligns her with the witch figure that appears within most Grimm fairy tales, pinning powerful women as dangerous and morally corrupt. Additionally, this supports the notion that nonbiological family relations are unnatural and threaten those who are pure and good. The queen views Snow White as a rival, framing their relationship as a competition. This dynamic corroborates the ideology that a woman's power is

⁶ Step mothers are usually the antagonists of Grimm Fairy tales, observed in almost all stories.

rooted in her beauty, which causes the queen to feel threatened and to subsequently order the death of her daughter to maintain her perceived power provided by her superior beauty.

Still Snow White's power is greater, because when the huntsman takes her into the woods to slaughter her, she begs for mercy and he gives in, letting her off into the woods. He then cuts out the lungs and liver of a little pig running by and delivers this instead to the queen. Snow White runs through the woods and is led to a small cottage by the forest animals. This cottage was filled with seven sets of everything; plates, beds, and even mugs. She helped herself to their food, beds, and fell asleep until the seven little men finally returned home and found the beautiful child asleep in their cottage. The dwarves ask her her name and story to which they find sympathy with the young girl. They allow her to stay on one condition, that she tends to the house and keeps everything orderly.

The importance of seven in this story is no coincidence. The number seven is seen in her age as well as the amount of men that take care of little Snow White in the woods. Dr. Elaine Goodfriend explores the idea of seven in religious contexts stating, "...7 became identified with holiness and perfection" (Goodfriend, 2021)." Seven can be seen throughout the bible in multiple areas such as the seven days of creation in the Book of Genesis, Noah bringing animals in groups of seven into the ark, and even the seven years of abundance and seven years of famine in the story of Joseph. The number has a connotation of holiness, completion, and perfection (Goodfriend, 2021). Snow White is meant to embark on her story when seven and it is complete with the help of the seven dwarves. The significance of her story within the context of the number seven is driven by divine intervention separating the girl from her wicked step mother and driving her onto her destined path.

The dwarves did keep the beautiful girl and told her not to let anyone into the home when they went to work mining ore through the day. They knew her stepmother would soon know where she was staying and they were correct. The queen ate the lungs and liver of the pig and stood in front of her magic mirror once more to ask who was fairest in all the land (Tatar, 1992, p.140). The mirror told her,

“Frau Königin, ihr seid die schönste hier,

aber Sneewittchen über den Bergen

bei den sieben Zwergen

ist noch tausendmal schöner als Ihr "(Grimm, 1812).

“Madam queen, you are the fairest here, but Snow White over the mountains and with the seven dwarves is still a thousand more times fair as you.”

Upon hearing that the hunter had not slain Snow White, the queen grew enraged with envy and schemed new ways to become the fairest in all the land by killing her step daughter. She tried multiple times to kill Snow White first with lace, then a poison comb, and finally a beautiful red apple filled with poison. The first two attempts failed but in her final attempt to poison the princess, she succeeded. She asked her mirror once again who was the fairest and she finally was told it was the queen now fairest in the whole land. She finally felt a release of envy and was content.

Here the queen is envious of the young daughter's beauty and it is evident that she purely idealises being young and gorgeous over morality. She is showcased as old, envious, cruel, and vain in direct contrast to Snow White. Snow White is fawned upon by all characters: the dwarves, the animals, and eventually the prince. She is idealized for her domesticity, maternal care of the dwarves, and youthful beauty, all of which construct the story's portrayal of the

perfect woman (Hallmark, 2014). The vain and evil connotation from the queen comes from her actions driven by undesirable emotions and obsessive vanity.

The dwarves tried all they could to revive Snow White after she had been poisoned, but the girl was dead with no possibility of resurrection. They decided the girl was too beautiful to leave in the ground covered by dirt so after three days of mourning her, they built a coffin to lay her to rest. The coffin was made of clear glass with gold letters spelling her name, revealing her stature as a princess. The glass coffin directly emulates how the supporting characters valued Snow White's beauty. She was too beautiful to bury, to be killed by the huntsman, and too beautiful to turn away when in need lost in the woods. Each day the animals would come to mourn with the dwarves as the princess laid there, red as blood, black haired as ebony wood, and white as the snow. One day a prince came to the woods and found the beautiful princess. He wanted to take her with him so he asked to buy the coffin to have Snow White with him everywhere. The dwarves refused until they became saddened by the prince's pleas and let him take her. The prince's servants lifted the coffin and tripped, dislodging the piece of apple she had bitten, which caused her to come back to life. The prince then offered to marry her and Snow White fell in love. They became married and when the queen heard of the ceremony she had to witness the princess alive for herself. She attended the wedding and was punished for her wicked actions by being forced to wear red hot iron shoes and dance to her death. The new queen and king lived together happily and content.

Snow White's value is established almost entirely through her physical appearance while her passivity and willingness to perform household labor secures her protection and survival through the efforts of seven men. The story portrays the Queen as ambitious and vain, which reveals her as morally corrupt and ultimately deserving of her extreme punishment. Through the

contrast of these two feminine characters, the tale reinforces cultural expectations that virtuous women should be modest, compliant and confined to the domestic household, while women who seek authority or independence are portrayed as destructive and morally corrupt. This tale reflects the perceived threat that youthful beauty posed to established female authority, as the queen's jealousy drove her to increasingly drastic measures. Snow White's survival in the forest did not come from resistance, but from obedience which emphasizes her passivity. When she arrives at the dwarves' cottage her safety is contingent on her willingness to perform domestic labor like cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the household for the men who are protecting her. This is very reminiscent of the ideas that were held about the women's role in housework. The Queen's repeated attempts to kill Snow White further develop the moral framework even when she disguises herself as an old woman to attempt to poison Snow White.

Snow White's conclusion further emulates the contrast between desirable and condemnable femininity where the Queen is sentenced to death and Snow White lives happily ever after with her new husband. Their actions correlate with their destined endings and aid the idea of punishment versus reward within culturally expected roles for women. Their contribution to embodying protestant morals reveals their fate and supports the guidance for audience members actions.

Cinderella

The tale of *Aschenputtel*, Cinderella, one of the most famous fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm, provides a unique lens through which to examine societal views on women's roles in society and the cultural values that shaped nineteenth century Germany.

The original Grimm version of *Cinderella* reflects a harsh, patriarchal society deeply rooted in traditional morality. The story centers on Aschenputtel, a passive yet morally pure girl

who endures cruel treatment at the hands of her stepmother and stepsisters. It begins with the introduction of a loving family who endures the tragedy of the sickness and death of the mother. The daughter, distraught, mourned her mother until the earth was covered by snow. After the snow cleared the father had a new wife who brought two daughters into the home. The two daughters were,

“...die waren von Angesicht schön, von Herzen aber stolz und hoffährtig und böse”(Grimm, 1812).

“...they were in appearance fair, but in their hearts they were proud, arrogant, and wicked”.

The step sisters were not a part of Cinderella's true family and therefore their familial bond of blood shined through their actions. They would not treat Cinderella as their own family as she was not (Hewitt-White, 2003). The stigma against mixing families is once again shown through the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales as another family exemplifies the dangers of combining two households into one, marrying again and creating a family disconnected by blood.

The sisters would torment Cinderella as they took away her nice clothes, removed her bed, and made her complete house chores from dusk to dawn. She slept by the ashes on the floor by which she got her name, Ashenputtel or Cinderella, because she was always dirty. One day, the girl's father went to the fair and asked all his daughters what they would like him to bring home. The step sisters replied pearls and clothes while Cinderella asked for the first branch her father touched on his way home. The father complied and brought home a branch for Cinderella which she planted at her mother's grave and her tears watered it into a beautiful tree.

The tree in German ideology comes from the long history of stories revolving around the dense forests that people lived in and traveled through. The tree or forests became a symbol of

not only German Nationalism but also "...trees were a poetic bridge between the depths of earth and the heights of heaven..."(Hacken, 2008). The branch Cinderella plants at her mothers grave was her way of connecting with her mother even through death. She connects herself in the earth to the heavens by nurturing a branch into a tree to reach her mother. The tree also becomes a symbol of purity, guidance, and maternal protection throughout the story. Unlike the stepmother, whose influence is rooted in cruelty, Cinderella's deceased mother continues to nurture and guide her through the natural world by way of her tree (Schwartz, 2012). This connection reinforces the Romantic idea that nature possesses spiritual power and moral truth. By tending to the tree, Cinderella demonstrates devotion, patience, and emotional purity, qualities that ultimately lead to her reward and transformation.

As the tree grew, it became the home to a bird that watched over Cinderella and brought whatever she wished for. As she tended to all the chores and her tree, the king of the land announced a feast and ball to find a wife for his son. The stepsisters called to Cinderella to brush their hair, dress them, and get them ready for the ball. They scorned her for not being able to dress for the ball as she had no ballgowns and she pleaded to be able to go. The mother then, to get her to stop asking, threw a plate of peas into the ashheap and told her if she could sort them all out, she may attend the ball. Cinderella called on the animals to help her take all the peas out and they did just that. The enraged mother told her she had nothing to wear and could not attend. Cinderella then went to her tree and asked for a lending hand,

"Bäumlein rüttel und schüttel dich,
wirf schöne Kleider herab für mich"(Grimm, 1812).

"Little tree shake and quiver, throw down beautiful clothes for me"

The tree threw down a beautiful gown and Cinderella went to the ball where the prince

became captivated by her. They danced all night and when it was time to return home, she lost the prince following her home where she had hidden in the pigeon house. The same happened for three nights; she shook the tree and was given a beautiful gown, danced with no one but the prince, and lost him at the end of the night ending back by the ashes with the help of her bird friends. The last night however, she left her gold slipper and the prince declared whoever fit the shoe would be his bride.

The help of the birds is steady and consistent throughout the story, symbolizing the connection of Cinderella to her mother from the heavens. The birds find their home within the tree that grew upon the grave of Cinderella's mother. Both these nature symbols work together to build the connection of Cinderella and her mother. Not only do the birds help Cinderella, but they symbolize her entrapment in an unhappy home as, "Birds signify thwarted or dissatisfied freedom..." (Patil, 2026).

Cinderella's birds are a direct representation of divine intervention from the heavens while also symbolizing her repressed livelihood and longing for freedom. Beyond the presence of the birds, the three nights of celebration at the ball also connect the narrative to the biblical significance of the number three. Within Protestant Christian symbolism, the number three is associated with divine completeness, perfection, and spiritual fulfillment through concepts such as the Holy Trinity and resurrection narratives (Willmington, 2018). Cinderella's repeated appearances across the three nights strengthens the idea that her transformation and ultimate reward are not accidental, but spiritually guided and morally justified. The repetition of three emphasizes the inevitability of divine justice and the completion of Cinderella's journey from suffering to redemption (Booker, 2010).

After hearing of the prince's quest to find the owner of the shoe, the step sisters scheme to

fit the slipper, one cutting off her toe and the other her heel. The prince is fooled once and then again which is only corrected later by the birds chirping,

“Rucke di guck, rucke di guck!

Blut ist im Schuck: (Schuh)

Der Schuck ist zu klein,

Die rechte Braut sitzt noch daheim”(Grimm, 1812)

“ Look again, look again, look at the shoe! There is blood in the shoe. The slipper is too small, the correct bride sits at home”.

The birds once again guide the destiny here of Cinderella. After the young girls mutilate their feet and fail at deceiving the prince, he finds Cinderella, has her try on the shoe with a perfect fit and they then were to marry. At the wedding, the two punish the evil mother and sisters by sending the birds to pluck their eyes where after the married couple can be freed from their past and live happily ever after.

Unlike later versions, this tale does not lightly involve violence and punishment but embraces it. This can also tell us about the torture utilized at the time, how normalized the use of violence to combat injustice really was in this social and historical context. The original tale does not shy away from violence and punishment, but instead embraces brutality as a form of moral correction and justice (Elder, 2014). This reflects broader attitudes toward punishment, where corporal punishment, public suffering, and physical consequences were commonly accepted methods of enforcing behavioral standards. The violent imagery throughout *Cinderella*, including bodily mutilation and the blinding of the stepsisters, would not have appeared excessively shocking to contemporary audiences in the same way it likely does to modern readers. Instead, these punishments reinforced the idea that immoral behavior deserved visible

and severe consequences, aligning with Protestant moral frameworks that connected suffering, discipline, and justice.

In the story, doves peck out the eyes of the evil stepsisters, and both even mutilate their feet to fit into a golden slipper left behind by Cinderella. These brutal outcomes served to fortify moral lessons of the time like virtue and suffering are eventually rewarded, while cruelty is punished. However, Aschenputtel's passivity and patience are her primary virtues directly contradicting those who are evil in the narrative. She is obedient and relies heavily on supernatural assistance, her dead mother's spirit and magical birds, to achieve her happy ending. Not only do the interactions between characters tell part of the story, but the colors of each night underline a difference in sun and moon. In the Grimm version of *Cinderella*, the repeated emphasis on the colors of each night from sunset to moonlight mirrors the passage of time and Aschenputtel's patience while awaiting her prince. Just as the sun and moon function as heavenly symbols, her steadfast virtue persists despite cruelty, reinforcing the idea that morality is inevitable and divinely sanctioned (Çetin, 2024). This celestial imagery highlights how early fairy tales valued patience and moral constancy over personal agency or self expression to achieve peace and justice. The narrative privileges moral endurance over female independence, a theme strengthened through recurring religious and celestial symbolism.

In Christian hagiography, doves are symbols of divine justice and even purity, often acting as agents of God's will rather than gentle creatures alone. When doves appear in saints' lives, they frequently mark moral truth and expose sin through miraculous intervention as seen as their aggression towards the evil antagonists of Cinderella. In Aschenputtel, the doves pecking out the stepsisters' eyes echoes this tradition, transforming the birds into instruments of heavenly judgment that punish moral blindness as much as physical wrongdoing. The actions of the step

sisters and mother are not punished by the people and so the heavenly symbols of the story must seek out justice and complete heavenly interference (Youvan, 2024).

As the story of *Cinderella* ceases, the tale reveals much more than a story of transformation and love. Through divine intervention and moral reward, the Grimm Brothers reinforce the domestic ideology of femininity, obedience, religion, and justice. The protagonist who is kind, obedient, complies with domestic labor, and endures hardship is rewarded through social mobility of marriage and a happy ending. While the good are rewarded, the evil and wicked meet a different fate: they are mutilated, dismissed from society, and punished by heavenly creatures who recognize their moral corruption. The violence and divine justice present throughout the tale portray harsh realities for those who choose to disobey the behavioral standards of the communities in which these stories circulated, creating a perfect warning for children who wish to disobey. As a result, *Aschenputtel* functions not only as a fairy tale, but also as a cultural reflection of nineteenth century German values, where female virtue, patience, and submission were rewarded while female ambition and cruelty were harshly condemned

Witches

Through the lens of witchcraft, across *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella* the idea of the witch threatens societal order, especially female autonomy outside patriarchal normalities. In all three of these stories there are female figures, often portrayed as jealous, controlling, overly ambitious and sometimes even magical, who seek to maintain power. This is frequently done through an obsession with beauty and dominance over younger women showcasing the relationship between “good” and “bad” femininity, “Conventional female stereotypes in fairy tales are limited to either good mothers, good wives or good daughters who are submissive or wicked witches and stepmothers who are deviant women”(Jalal, 2022, p. 143). In *Rapunzel*, the

evil enchantress mother enforces isolation and control over her sexuality and independence, while in Snow White the queen's transformation and utilization of magic to seize control reflects the dangers of female ambition and vanity. Similarly in *Cinderella*, although the stepmother lacks supernatural abilities, she fulfills the same narrative role by exerting domestic control over Cinderella's mobility and self expression. Across the Grimm narratives, these characters are often removed or punished, reinforcing the idea that women who seek power or independence outside socially expected roles are dangerous and must be corrected. By this motif, the witch not only serves as a villain, but a cultural warning against female autonomy.

In a 2022 study, Jansa Jalal highlights the direct contrast between princesses and witch figures throughout each text in the *Kinder und Hausmarchen* publication, emphasizing how the two are present as oppositional representations of femininity. Those who are good are supported by all, and even nature, while women characterized as wicked become punished brutally and are removed from positions of authority. The stark contrasts between these figures become symbolic inverses of each other: beauty versus ugliness, compassion versus cruelty, passiveness versus ambition, and even youth versus aging. Through these oppositions, the Grimm Brothers construct a clear distinction between ideal femininity and deviant femininity, reinforcing cultural expectations surrounding women's behavior during their publication.

Rapunzel and her enchantress have a distinct contrast in literary representation as a beautiful young girl and a controlling older woman. They solidify the opposition between ideal and deviant femininity that keeps a youthful princess locked away, but there is much more about the story than just its outline. The antagonist through this story not only embodies the traditional role of an evil suppressor, but also can be seen as a societal control of female autonomy. The enchantress punishes Rapunzel's mother by taking her child, but Rapunzel bears the real

suffering as she spends her life caged and cut away from society. The enchantress knows that if she were to escape, Rapunzel would flourish to form a life of her own and away from the control of the enchantress. By imprisoning Rapunzel within a tower hidden deep in the woods, the enchantress restricts her access to love, sexuality, social interaction, and freedom.

The tower Rapunzel is held within is not only a physical barrier, but it may represent the constraints of where women found themselves in the world during this time. The witch travels out of the tower, coming back and forth as she pleases, while Rapunzel stays idle inside. The prince left the tower and came back and forth as he pleased, but Rapunzel stayed inside. Rapunzel did as she was expected and awaited their return day after day when she was completely capable of escape, but she did not. According to Brian Pavlac, accusations of witchcraft often targeted women who existed outside socially accepted gender roles or possessed influence independent from male authority (Pavlac, 2009). The enchantress challenges these patriarchal expectations through her independence and unrestricted mobility, characteristics that position her as socially threatening within the narrative. Unlike Rapunzel, she is not confined by domestic expectations or dependent upon a husband or male figure for survival. As a result, the story contrasts two opposing models of femininity: Rapunzel, who embodies obedience and passivity, and the enchantress, who represents autonomy, authority, and female power outside patriarchal control. Through this contrast, the Grimm Brothers reinforce the cultural belief that ideal femininity was tied to submission and domesticity, while independent women were portrayed as dangerous and morally corrupt.

At the conclusion of the narrative, the enchantress does not face a brutal punishment from a divine justice or vengeful actions from the princess, just is not mentioned to control Rapunzel or the prince anymore. The enchantress is not reprimanded through action but instead simply

removed. Her removal from the tale may suggest Rapunzel's reintegration into society and her successful containment within patriarchal structures. Through this ending, the Grimm Brothers promote the belief that female autonomy and authority exist only temporarily within the narrative and are ultimately replaced by traditional domestic ideals and the wicked who are powerful will be removed from their authoritative positions even when they possess magical powers.

While an enchantress who is unrelated to the protagonist may be expected to act cruelty towards the child she is meant to nurture, *Snow White* represents a far more disturbing conflict through the figure of a stepmother who is tied to the princess not by blood, but by their familiar obligation. The stepmother brought into Snow White's life is consumed by vanity and jealousy, emotions that drive her to use magical power in order to deceive and repeatedly attempt to murder the young princess. Unlike traditional maternal figures who are expected to protect, and even nurture their child, the queen instead becomes a source of danger and corruption (Herlisanto et al., 2022). Her transformation into a witch figure reflects fears surrounding female ambition, aging, vanity, and authority outside acceptable femininity.

The Queen's violence extends beyond attempted murder and enters into symbolic cannibalism. After ordering the Huntsman to kill Snow White, she demands that he return with the girl's lungs and liver, so that she can consume them herself. This act transforms jealousy into bodily violence, as the queen attempts to metaphorically consume the beauty and innocence that she fears losing through age. According to Maria Tatar, female antagonists throughout Grimm fairy tales frequently appear as cannibals and *Menschenfresserin*, or devourer of humans. This reflects the historical association between witchcraft and bodily consumption within European folklore (Tatar, 1992, p.140). Similarly, Madalina Ursoi explains that, in the European popular

consciousness, the image of the witch was fundamentally associated with the idea of cannibalism, “where witches were often portrayed as monstrous figures who consumed children” (Ursoi, 2021, p.192). Throughout this imagery, the Grimm Brothers transform her motherhood into something horrifying, presenting the queen not simply as vain, but a monstrous inversion of femininity and maternal care.

Within the conclusion of *Snow White*, the queen’s obsession with beauty and control, ultimately leads to a violent punishment. Unlike *Snow White*, who is rewarded for her innocence and beauty, the queen is forced to wear heated iron heels in which she dances her way to death. The presence of a punishment for the witch figure supports the moral outlook suggested during the time of publication for the Grimm fairy tales, the *Menschenfresserin*⁷ and wicked figures cannot remain within society and are therefore removed through divine justice or the actions of others within the narrative. Her vanity and jealousy ultimately meet their end as *Snow White* gains a new beginning.

Snow White is one of many Grimm fairy tales that contains the figure of the evil stepmother. Another prominent example of this motif appears in *Cinderella*, where the stepmother similarly functions as a controlling female authority figure who constricts the protagonist's freedom and social mobility. Unlike the queen in *Snow White*, *Cinderella's* stepmother does not rely on magic or supernatural deception, yet she fulfills the same narrative role through domestic domination and emotional cruelty. She stripped *Cinderella* of her social status, forcing her into constant household labor, and attempts to prevent her from entering higher society through marriage. Through this control, the stepmother transforms the household into a place of suffering, rather than protection as is ultimately punished, reinforcing the idea that female authority outside nurturing motherhood, becomes dangerous and corrupt.

⁷ Devourer of Humans

Although Cinderella's stepmother does not contain spells or magical mirrors, she still embodies the fears associated with deviant femininity and authority outside of nurturing motherhood. She isolates Cinderella to demonstrate control over her while attempting to advance her own blood daughters, an example of combining families resulting in disaster (Hewitt-White, 2003). Much like the queen in *Snow White*, the stepmother views the younger girl as competition to the success of our own daughters, as Cinderella is much more obedient and hard working than her own children. Within this relation, the Grimm brothers demonstrate that witchcraft within fairy tales is not always dependent upon literal magic, but can also manifest their cruelty and domination of an older woman to a younger girl.

Across *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella*, the witch figure appears in multiple forms: the enchantress, the cannibalistic queen, and the cruel stepmother. Although these women differ in their methods of control, they each represent anxiety surrounding female authority, ambition, power, and autonomy outside patriarchal expectations. In contrast to the youthful protagonists who are rewarded for obedience and beauty, these older female figures are portrayed as manipulative, jealous, controlling, and socially dangerous. Their inevitable removal from the narratives supports the restoration of social order and justice against supernatural or unfavorable women. By analyzing the presence of these figures throughout each of the stories, the witch becomes a pivotal character in which the Grimms outline societal expectations of women and the consequences for undesirable female attributes.

Femininity

While the witches, stepmothers, and enchantresses throughout the Grimm fairy tales represent a condemnable femininity, the young heroines embody the opposite ideal. Across *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella*, the tales repeatedly portray the admirable woman as

passive, obedient, beautiful, emotionally assuring, and devoted to any labor they may be expected to complete. These protagonists rarely achieve success through direct resistance or personal authority, but instead are rewarded for patience and their own endurance through suffering. By showcasing these characters, the Grimm Brothers reinforce any expectations surrounding what a good woman should be and how she may act as she is highly connected to her beauty and attachment to married life.

Music was not only accompanied by entertainment, but it was expected for a well rounded woman in the time of the publication of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, "...the fine line for musical women in the nineteenth century; one should aim to please with her playing, but if it is not of high enough quality, then she is ridiculed. Not only do women need to practice in order to please their guests, but she must not practice too much as to distract from her domestic duties and drift into the realm of virtuosity" (Drezins, 2022). To sing, play instruments, or be versed in craftful skills was a must for those who wanted to be eligible for marriage, and therefore an acceptable life. *Rapunzel* exemplifies these expectations through her beautiful, singing voice, which first captivates the prince before he ever sees her physical appearance. Her musical talent became symbolic of ideal femininity, emphasizing artistic beauty rather than intelligence or independence. The prince is drawn to her voice echoing throughout the forest and desires her before reaching the tower that held her captive. He is not drawn to her thoughts or ambitions upon meeting her, but is enticed by the sound of her voice. In this way, Rapunzel's voice becomes another ornament of femininity, something beautiful to be desired and ultimately possessed.

Alongside her captivating voice, Rapunzel remains obedient and fulfills the debt of her mother by staying locked away from society. She is compliant to the enchantress and does not

attempt to challenge her situation of captivity. She waits for rescue instead of acting on her own agency, which would have been an admirable trait of a woman at the time. Once she finds her prince and they become married, she fulfills her duty by becoming a mother and giving birth to their twins. Encountering the prince and hearing of the marriage upset the enchantress who remained adamant on retaining control over Rapunzel, and she is punished for losing her purity. This transformation further distances Rapunzel from the enchantress, whose authority depended upon preserving Rapunzel's isolation and innocence. Her eventual transition from imprisoned girl to wife and mother, strengthens the cultural expectation that a woman's fulfillment and social legitimacy is achieved through their marriage and motherhood (Hallmark, 2014).

Rapunzel's role as an ideal woman becomes even more evident through the reunion with the prince, where she is expressed as emotionally nurturing as she heals the injured eyes of her husband. After wandering blind through the wilderness, the prince's sight is restored when Rapunzel's tears fall upon his eyes. In this moment, Rapunzel becomes a direct contrast from the enchantress herself. While the witch isolates, controls, and harms others in pursuit of power, Rapunzel nurtures and heals. The enchantress embodies domination and authority outside accepted femininity, whereas Rapunzel represents the idealized women whose value lies in beauty, emotional gentleness, obedience, and maternal care. Rather than overcoming hardship through resistance or personal agency, Rapunzel achieves her fulfillment through caregiving and marriage. Her actions and representation of the ideal woman contrasts the enchantress entirely creating a good versus bad motif reflected in their endings, one is rewarded with marriage and reentry into society as the other completely disappears from the story and remains isolated.

When analyzing femininity within Snow White, the theme is placed directly in front of the audience through the repeated question of "who is the fairest of them all", "...a clear link

between beauty and goodness, most often in references to younger women, and between ugliness and evil”(Baker-Sperry & Grauerholz, 2003, p. 718). Throughout the narrative, beauty, innocence, and household labor become the defining qualities of ideal womanhood, while vanity, ambition, and aging are associated with corruption and moral failure.

Snow White, just seven years old, is defined in her story as the most beautiful in all the land. One cannot help, but notice her extreme youth and how sharply it contrasts with the Queen’s age and growing obsession with beauty. This contrast fuels the queen’s jealousy and outlines the narrative’s fixation on youth and beauty as defining qualities of feminine value. As explored by Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003), attractiveness within fairy tales is frequently associated with goodness and moral purity, immediately signaling to readers who should be viewed as virtuous and who should be feared. This may explain why Grimm heroines are consistently described as extraordinarily beautiful throughout their respective narratives. As the intended audience may have been around Snow White’s age, the emphasis on innocence and youthful beauty becomes especially significant in the analysis of what young women consuming these stories may have understood femininity, desirability, and gender norms as. The repeated association between beauty and virtue upholds cultural expectations surrounding femininity and desirability, impacting young girls’ outlook on what it means to be feminine.

Not only does Snow White’s inherent power come from her appearance, but also her completion of household labor. She is permitted to remain with the dwarves only on the condition that she cooks, cleans, sews, and maintains the household for the seven men. While Snow White’s survival depends upon her willingness to conform to domestic expectations established by the dwarves, the Queen actively utilizes her own agency and authority to pursue power and control. The contrast between the two women supports the broader moral structure of

the tale: Snow White's meekness and domesticity are rewarded with protection and eventual marriage, while the Queen's ambition and independence ultimately lead to her violent punishment. Through these opposing representations, the narrative suggests that femininity was safest and most socially acceptable when it remained passive, beautiful, and confined within domestic expectations.

Snow White's femininity is further fortified by her lack of agency she possesses throughout her story. Her actions are commonly dependent on the help of others around her. The huntsman spares her life, the dwarves provide her shelter, the queen repeatedly manipulates and attacks her, and the prince ultimately claims her after discovering her within the glass coffin. She becomes less of an independent character with her own thoughts and more of an object of admiration. Even in a deep, death like sleep, her beauty becomes the reason she is fawned on by her savior, the prince. All of these attributes support the importance of a woman to be obedient, beautiful, and youthful to be truly feminine.

Similar to the features of *Rapunzel* and *Snow White*, *Cinderella* outlines common aspirations women should strive towards to achieve becoming an ideal woman. She remains patient and endures suffering at the hands of her stepmother and stepsisters without rebellion and continues to complete domestic labor despite her mistreatment. Cinderella's kindness and obedience to her step family and household duties ultimately become the qualities that reward her with marriage, social elevation, and acceptance into high society.

Cinderella's kindness, devotion, and purity all contribute to the expectations surrounding femininity showcased throughout the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales. Not only does she obediently serve those around her, but she is also heavily aided by the animals in the story. The doves and birds that support Cinderella's transformation symbolize innocence, gentleness, and moral purity,

reinforcing the idea that ideal femininity exists in harmony with nature itself. Throughout nineteenth century literature, birds were frequently associated with women and femininity, often representing emotional softness, vulnerability, and restricted freedom (Dahlstrom, 2025). Much like Cinderella herself, the birds are delicate, quiet, and nurturing figures rather than aggressive or authoritative ones. Their assistance throughout the narrative reinforces Cinderella's role as the ideal woman, whose value is rooted in passiveness and domestic virtue. Unlike her stepsisters, who pursue status through vanity and forcefulness, Cinderella achieves fulfillment because she remains humble, obedient, and morally pure, qualities that the Grimm Brothers repeatedly associate with admirable femininity.

Marriage ultimately functions as Cinderella's social and moral restoration and reward. She is saved by the male figure, entering higher society and freed from her metaphorical cage. Cinderella showcases the idea that ideal femininity would ultimately be recognized and rewarded by patriarchal authority, while others who act in opposition would be punished violently. As Cinderella's opposite, the stepsisters are punished for attempting to force their own advancement through deception and lose parts of their feet by way of self mutilation. Their mutilation of their feet in an attempt to fit the slipper reflects the extent to which women were expected to physically and socially conform in order to achieve desirability and status. When the birds later peck out the stepsisters' eyes, the narrative strengthens the Grimm Brothers' broader moral framework in which women associated with vanity, selfishness, and deviant femininity are publicly and brutally punished (Tatar, 1992).

Through Cinderella's transformation from servant to princess, the Grimm Brothers bolster the belief that the ideal woman should remain patient and devoted to domesticity, trusting that the suffering and obedience she endures would eventually be rewarded through marriage as

salvation (Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz, 2003).

Across each story analyzed, a femininity construct is generated through a constant set of expectations centered on beauty, obedience, passiveness, and devotion to domestic life (Neikirk, 2009). The protagonists are repeatedly rewarded for not independence, but their patience and suffering. To support the presence of these constructs, their opposing characters in their narrative represent everything that is unfavorable in a woman. These attributes include power, autonomy, vanity, and cruelty. Through these stories, the Grimm Brothers reflect broader, social values that connect a woman's worth to youth and ability to marry. Although these tales are often remembered as stories of magic and romance, they simultaneously function as cultural lessons that shaped young audiences' understanding of femininity and the roles women were expected to fulfill within society (Grauerholz, 2003).

Religious Ideology

Alongside representations of femininity and witchcraft, the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales are deeply shaped by religious and moral ideology. Across *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella*, sin, punishment, and redemption function as recurring narrative structures that reinforce social and moral expectations. Characters associated with sinful actions such as greed, vanity, and more, are condemned to intense suffering, exile, or bodily harm, while those who remain morally pure and obedient are ultimately rewarded through reunion, marriage, or divine justice. The patterns prevalent throughout these narratives reflect Protestant moral values present within nineteenth century Germany (Zipes, 1988) and support the belief that suffering serves as a path toward repentance, moral correction, and eventual redemption. After punishment is inflicted upon those who disrupt moral or social order, harmony is restored within the narrative world (Snyder, 1978). As explored by Zipes (1988), the violence and punishment present throughout

fairy tales function not only as entertainment, but also as moral discipline designed to shape the behavior and values of consumers of these tales. These themes are consistently reflected throughout Grimm fairy tales, but are especially prominent within *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella*.

Sin within *Rapunzel* is explored not only through the controlling nature of the enchantress, but also through the greed of Rapunzel's own mother. By stealing the rapunzel from her neighbor's garden, she violates moral and social boundaries, an act that ultimately costs her child and condemns Rapunzel to years of isolation and suffering (Zipes, 1988). The narrative becomes especially significant because sin is not confined solely to female characters, as the prince also falls victim to desire and transgression. Drawn only by the voice of a young woman hidden within the tower, the prince secretly pursues Rapunzel and ultimately impregnates her and takes her "purity". Following this act, he is violently punished through the loss of his eyesight and is forced to wander alone through the forest and desert in prolonged suffering. Across the narrative, each sinful act is met with a corresponding punishment, reinforcing the moral structure present throughout Grimm fairy tales in which transgression inevitably results in suffering before redemption can occur.

Following the punishment of each sin, a form of resolution and restoration emerges within *Rapunzel*. The enchantress disappears from the narrative entirely, while Rapunzel is ultimately reunited with the prince as he meets their children for the first time. The prince's blindness and prolonged wandering through the wilderness function as sufficient punishment for the sins and desires that disrupted moral order earlier in the narrative. This reflects a Protestant emphasis on personal suffering and repentance before redemption. Only after enduring hardship and isolation are the characters permitted reunion and familial fulfillment, reinforcing the belief

that moral restoration must be earned through suffering and endurance (Zipes, 1988).

Just as *Rapunzel* contains religious ideology centered around suffering and redemption, *Snow White* explores morality through divine justice and the punishment of sin. In contrast to *Rapunzel*, where suffering ultimately leads to reunion and healing, the Queen's vanity and pride results only in moral corruption and a violent end. Her obsession with becoming "the fairest in all the land" transforms beauty into sinful ambition, consuming her identity and distorting her role as a mother figure. Her repeated attempts to murder Snow White through deception and witchcraft further demonstrate how pride and jealousy corrupt both morality and femininity. These sins are portrayed as too grave to be redeemed through repentance alone, ultimately leading to her brutal demise.

Within the narrative, the Queen's sins are punishable only through death, which she ultimately endures as Snow White is simultaneously rewarded with marriage and social restoration. Unlike the Queen, Snow White remains morally pure throughout the story, and the injustices committed against her are repeatedly resolved through protection and eventual rescue. As explored by Maria Tatar, punishments within Grimm fairy tales are intentionally excessive in order to instill fear surrounding immoral behavior and sustain moral order. The Queen's brutal punishment through the heated iron shoes therefore functions as both spectacle and warning, demonstrating that vanity, pride, and violent ambition inevitably lead to destruction and will be punished. In contrast, Snow White's patience and innocence encourage the idea that enduring suffering with moral purity ultimately leads to reward, restoration, and social acceptance. Through the Queen's violent punishment and Snow White's eventual restoration, the story reinforces a belief that divine justice ultimately restores balance by rewarding purity and preventing sinful actions.

Just as Snow White explores morality through justice and punishment, Cinderella solidifies religious ideology through the reward of patience and endurance. Unlike the queen, whose ambition leads to destruction, Cinderella remains humble, despite years of emotional abuse, humiliation, and labor. Her suffering is not resisted through any rebellious action, but quietly endured, honoring the belief that virtue was demonstrated through patience and perseverance similarly to Snow White completed.

Within the story, Cinderella's goodness is repeatedly contrasted with a cruel and unforgiving stepmother and stepsisters. As Cinderella remains pure and obedient, the stepsister's attempt to force themselves into desirability and status when struggling to deceive the prince through physical mutilation. Their willingness to cut portions of their own feet reflects the destructive consequences of attempting to achieve status and reward through the sinful action of deception. This supports the Protestant moral framework present throughout the narratives, in which virtuous behavior is ultimately rewarded, while dishonesty and moral corruption lead to punishment and social condemnation (Parr, 2023).

The continuous realization of moral structure emerges through the punishment of the stepsisters and the eventful rise of Cinderella herself. The deception does not go unpunished, as the birds immediately peck out the eyes of the stepsisters and mother for their cruelty and dishonesty towards Cinderella. Birds are also portrayed in many tales as divine creatures that are closely tied to femininity (Dahlstrom, 2025). Their connection to Cinderella becomes especially significant as they originate from the tree planted beside her mother's grave, linking the punishment directly to maternal guidance and divine intervention. The birds seem to operate within the story as symbols or enforcers of justice, in which the violent punishment reflects Protestant ideals, emphasizing once again the punishment of those who do not follow the

established moral order (Parr, 2023).

Conclusion

From magical mirrors to seven tiny dwarves, the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales showcase not simply their magical narratives, but they preserve and reflect the moral expectations and social structures of nineteenth century Germany. Through *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, and *Cinderella*, the Grimm Brothers tell the tale of femininity that is deeply tied to obedience, beauty, patience, domesticity, and moral purity, while women who pursue vanity, authority, ambition, or independence outside their approved limitations are a symbol of danger and deserving of punishment. Witchcraft, femininity, and religion become intertwined throughout these narratives, reinforcing the distinction between the "good" woman and the morally corrupt one, and tell audience members all they may and must not do.

Across each tale, suffering functions as both punishment and moral instruction (Zipes, 1988). Characters who embody greed, pride, deception, or disobedience are subjected to exile, mutilation, blindness, or death, while those who remain humble, patient, and obedient are ultimately rewarded through marriage, restoration, and social acceptance. These repeated patterns reflect broader Protestant ideals emphasizing repentance, endurance, divine justice, and the restoration of moral order through patriarchal and heterosexual marriage, while also entertaining youth by the thousands. For young audiences, these violent punishments substantiate the idea that immoral behavior would eventually be met with consequences supporting moral actions.

Just as *Struwwelpeter* was not just a bedtime story for me and called me to action, the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales reveal far more than simple bedtime stories intended for children. They function as cultural lessons that shape how readers understood and continue to understand

the social order. As a child, I threw away every match I could find after hearing the story, demonstrating how narratives directed toward children can influence behavior and overall decision making. Recent psychological studies surrounding imitation and media influence similarly suggest that children internalize and reproduce behaviors, fears, and social expectations presented through stories and visual media (Over, 2020). Although these narratives continue to be adapted and romanticized today, their original forms preserve the values and expectations of the society in which they were created, allowing modern audiences to better understand the relationship between folklore, religion, gender, and cultural identity within nineteenth century Germany.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Flowchart of the Capstone Research Methodology

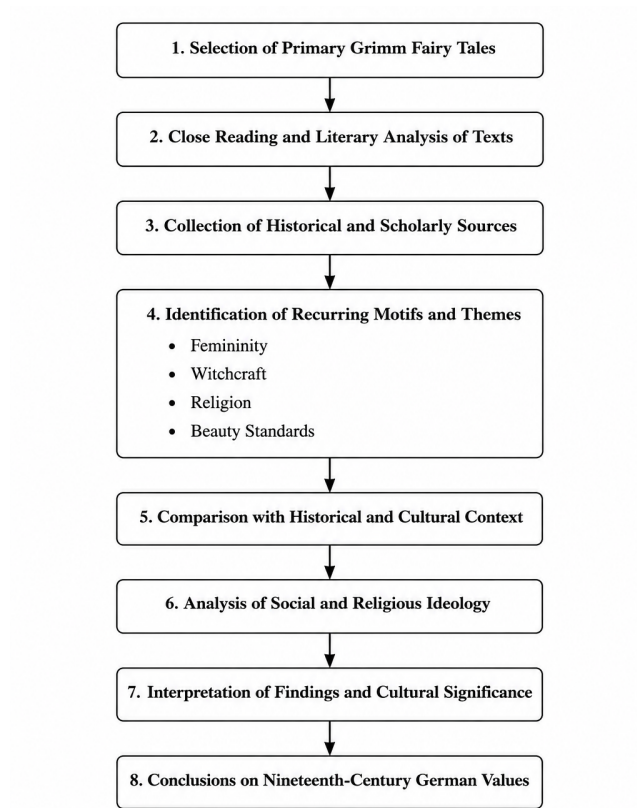


Figure 2. Selected Grimm Fairy Tale Adaptations and Scholarly Resources Compiled for Comparative Analysis

This link includes a selection of modern fairy tale adaptations, scholarly texts, and critical resources related to Grimm fairy tales that were consulted throughout the capstone research process. These materials were gathered with research assistance from Carrie Cruce and helped start the comparative analysis of femininity, witchcraft, religion, and cultural evolution within Grimm narratives and their modern reinterpretations. These materials may support future research regarding the evolution and reinterpretation of Grimm fairy tales.