# THE STEPMOTHER IN CONTEMPORARY FAIRY TALES

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE TALE

Literary fairy tales have become a universally influential form of story telling. Today, children and adults alike identify with fairy tales and their motifs. These tales have evolved and been enriched throughout history in oral and literary forms. In whatever form they have adopted, fairy tales have suggested either unmistakable or veiled reflection upon the society and culture in which they are created. In fact, fairy tales have persisted in our society for two primary reasons: first, motifs that are fantastic, such as enchanted castles and talking animals, fill a psychological void. Second, motifs that are realistic, such as stepmothers and absent fathers, present a recognizable antagonist whom the reader often identifies in his or her own world. It is this second type of motif, one that is presumably reflective of society, this paper will analyze. A study of the history of the fairy tale in general, and the *Cinderella* tale specifically, presents a platform from which to begin an analysis. An effort will be made to examine the initial intent of the fairy tale and assess whether or not contemporary fairy tales continue to be reflective of roles in our society and culture today.

In particular, four contemporary versions of the *Cinderella* tale will be explored. More precisely, the stepmother antagonist made famous by the fairy tales of old will be examined to assess any revision or reidentification that has taken place over the literary history of the tale especially given changes in attitudes toward women over the recent decades. Additionally, this analysis will be considered in light of the prevalence of stepmothers in a society where divorce and remarriage occur at ever-increasing rates.

The stepmother in fairy tales, particularly *Cinderella,* has become the standard by which all stepmothers are measured—literary or otherwise. Examining the history of the fairy tale in general and Cinderella in particular, presents a foundation for understanding this great realm of influence. Following the evolution of the stepmother character opens the way to an enlightening look into the stepmother figure in contemporary adult versions of the *Cinderella* story. As will be established, fairy tales were originally reflective of society; therefore, logic concludes, modern tales will present an evolution that will reflect changes in attitudes and culture.

Also to be examined, the stereotype of the 'wicked stepmother' has become such an insidious misrepresentation of the family role, material stepmothers fall victim to the presumption. The *Cinderella* tale has been so deeply ingrained in the cultural psyche, children, stepmothers, and

members of society subconsciously establish belief systems based upon fairy tale conjecture. Critics can hardly argue that great universal evils were not vested in Cinderella's stepmother of old. Perrault, Grimms and others, all utilized the role as the central antagonistic figure. Today, the practice has not changed. It is not without angst that I find there is not a kind, positive, powerful stepmother figure in a contemporary version of *Cinderella* to present in this research. This reveals much about the distress that smolders in women in the familial role. To a large degree, they are continually victimized by unimaginative *Cinderella*-style tale writers who seek the easiest common denominator when in search of an antagonist. Also, the stepmother's lack of resistance to the mistreatment allows the perpetuation of the stereotype. How has this animosity toward the character come about? Solutions are difficult, but the pattern is evident. A broader glance at the genre is a good starting place for the examination to begin. First, however, the scene must be set.

## History

Unfortunately, tracking the history of fairy tales is not simple. However, even a cursory attempt at tracing the history of fairy tales reveals a deep level of sociological endurance. Today, the average person may be surprised to find that Walt Disney, while being an icon of the modern day children's tales, actually had little to do with the genesis of

the fairy tale genre. Fairy tales have their origin in the oral tradition. Obviously, this potentially goes back as far as time itself. In her book, *Discovering Children's Literature*, Judith Hillman notes, "Traditional literature began as soon as humans could speak" (22). Because literacy was not a common skill before the 15th century, folktales, from which fairy tales eventually emerge, found their dwelling place primarily in the oral tradition. These oral tales were passed down as "tales of initiation, worship, warning, and indoctrination" (Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth* 10). Moreover, these tales often came from shared experiences and beliefs. Because of a lack of documentation, it is difficult to identify precisely the evolution of the literary fairy tale prior to the 15th century. However, much is known about the culture and ideas in which this genre continued to developed.

Of primary interest to the fairy tale scholar is the fact that these tales were reflective of the society and culture in which they were created. For example, "When lives were short, ... girls of distinction married early. The princess in 'The Three Heads in the Well' who becomes a bride at fifteen, and Sleeping Beauty who welcomes her prince when 'fifteen or sixteen' (if the hundred years she has been asleep are not counted), were simply conforming to the practice of their time..." (Opie 19-20). Additionally, young women, because of arranged marriages and marriages of convenience, actually lived with the realistic fear of perhaps

marrying a 'beast' as reflected in such tales as "The Frog Prince" and "Beauty and the Beast." Fairy tales, therefore, were created for a specific audience that certainly might deal in real life with the very conflicts presented in fairy tales. These tales served to prepare these young women for such eventualities. "The most symbolic of the fairy tales after Cinderella, and the most intellectually satisfying, 'Beauty and the Beast' is the prime example of the world-wide beast marriage story, of which the classic text is that of Madame Leprince de Beaumont" (Opie 179). Clearly, the tale had specific use in allaying a young girl's fear of an arranged marriage. Like other fears, due to poverty and other societal woes, the concept of abandoned children in the forest was not unheard of. "Fairy tales are thus more realistic than they may appear at first sight; [sic] while the magic in them almost heightens the realism" (Opie 20).

The tradition of the storyteller eventually became the tradition of the storywriter. Jack Zipes notes, "With the rise of literacy and the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, the oral tradition of storytelling underwent an immense revolution" (*Fairy Tale as Myth* 10). This revolution would eventually lead to what we accept today as the modern fairy tale. And make no mistake, the formulae and motivation for creating fairy tales today has not changed.

Milestones within the evolution of the literary fairy tale include, in particular, the writing of Giambatista Basile (1575-1632). His *Lo Cunto de li*

*cunti overo lo trattenemiento de peccerille (The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for the Little Ones, 1634-6)*, also known as *Il Pentamerone,* is the "first integral collection consisting entirely of fairy tales to appear in Europe, and thus marks the passage from the oral tradition of folk tales to the artful and sophisticated 'authored' fairy tale" (Canepa 41). This collection contributes significantly to the literary genesis of such tales as *Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty,* and others.

Less than two decades after the death of Basile, a young woman was born who would change the face of French literary society. Marie-Catherine Le Jumel de Barnevill Baronne d'Aulnoy (1650-1705), often referred to simply as Madame d'Aulnoy, is credited with producing the first published literary fairy tale in French (Seifert 31). Additionally, she is credited with coining the expression 'conte de fées'. This expression was found in the title to d'Aulnoy's 1697-8 collection of tales, *Les Conte des fées.* This expression, when translated, was the source for the English 'fairy tale' (Seifert 175). Her style is known for melding "literary and folkloric traditions. Not unlike Perrault, she often employs humorous names, expressions, devices, and situations that create an ironic distance from popular oral narratives and their (reductive) association with children" (Seifert 31). As a fairy tale writer of the 17th century, she was among the educated women whose influence was felt in the phenomenon of the French salons.

The literary fairy tale received an opportunity to flourish in the French salons of the 17th century. "It was not Perrault but a group of writers, particularly aristocratic women, who gathered in salons during the seventeenth century and created the conditions for the rise of the fairy tale" (Zipes, *Fairy Tale as Myth* 18). It is timely to be reminded that even though women were the core supporters of the fairy tale and French salon phenomenon, the evil stepmother of the Cinderella tale did not see any mitigation of her wickedness at this most critical time in fairy tale history. Zipes notes the connections between salons and literary fairy tales, "Fairy-tale recitations and games were devised, generally by women in their salons, and they eventually led to the publication of the fairy tales during the 1790's" (*When Dreams Come True* 12). The correlation between the French salons of the 17th and early 18th centuries and the literary fairy tale as we know it today cannot be understated.

The extensive literary contributions of Charles Perrault (1628-1703) should not be overlooked in this glimpse into literary fairy tale history. Perrault, a member of the Académie Française, wrote to entertain the court of French king Louis XIV; however, he was in good literary company. His female contemporary Madame D'Aulnoy also wrote extensively. In discussion regarding Mme. D'Aulnoy, Zipes states:

> ...it was not until she had established a popular literary salon in which fairy tales were regularly presented, that she herself

> published four volumes of fairy tales between 1696 and 1698. Though Charles Perrault is generally considered to be the most significant French writer of fairy tales of this period, Mme. D'Aulnoy was undoubtedly more typical and more of a catalyst for other writers. (*When Dreams Come True* 12)

"Publication of the first book associated with children's literature is attributed to the Englishman William Caxton, who produced *Aesop's Fables* (1484), *Morte D'Arthur* (1485), and the *History of Reynard the Fox* (1481), among others" (Hillman 23). While Caxton may be *associated* with children's tales, the first book primarily for children was not written until 1658 by John Comenius and was entitled *Orbis Pictus, or the World Illustrated* (Hillman 25). These children's titles are relatively obscure. Titles that *are* associated with children's literature are *Snow White, Beauty and the Beast, Cinderella,* and *Hansel and Gretel.* However, these tales were written well before Comenius ever came onto the literary scene. The fairy tales that today are thought to be written for children were constructed well before the 1600s. Of primary concern is that fairy tales evolved and reflected the culture and society in which they were created. Some fairy tales, as they do now, stood out as more influential and fashionable among the fairy tale society.

## Cinderella

*Cinderella* has by far been the most famous and influential tale to come from the oral and literary traditions. Few girls under the age of twelve have not wished for their own handsome prince and secretly thought that, if they had the opportunity to try on the glass slipper, it would probably fit.

Highly reflective of the culture within which it was originally conceived, a young girl quite likely might find herself without a mother, or perhaps commanded to receive step-siblings into her home. Establishing the antiquity of the tale is a lengthy process, and perhaps the ancestry of the stepmother motif is one of the reasons it continues to be so persistent and recalcitrant to change.

The history of *Cinderella* is as fragmented as that of the fairy tale genre itself. The first version of *Cinderella* currently known is from ninth-century China (Jameson 71). In this version of the stepchild story, Cinderella looks to an enchanted fish to assist her with her plight. Along with the evolution of the fairy tale genre itself, *Cinderella* had its first literary debut in the *Il Pentamerone* published in 1634. The Basile version, *La gatta Cennerentola* or *The Cat Cinderella*, presents a Cinderella figure somewhat different than the one we are familiar with today. In this tale, a Prince finds himself widowed with a daughter, Zezolla, whom he loves immensely. He remarries a hateful woman and the daughter's governess

convinces her to kill the hateful woman by closing her in a chest. The plan goes accordingly and the father eventually remarries the governess who is only kind to Zezolla for "five or six days." Even in the 17th century, motifs were established clearly enough to identify the characters and fulfill expectations for their goodness or evil, as the case may be.

To speak of *Cinderella* in its broadest sense is to encompass several types of the tale. Indeed the varieties of the tale extend far beyond the Disneyfied and cleansed version we know of today. Specifically, the tale is divided into three subtypes, the 'skin' tales, the King Lear variety, and the stepmother antagonist type. Conspicuously, one type of the tale will rise above the others in influence.

Common to all of the Cinderella tales is the concept of emotional and sometimes sexual maturation. Cinderella is always searching for independence and each form of the tale is marked by a moment wherein she "comes of age." This is true throughout history and even today. Each type of the tale presents this evolution in different manifestations.

The first category of tales, the skin-type, is also known as the "incest-Cinderella." These tales include, among others, *Catskin*, *Donkeyskin* and *All Fur*. The primary direction of these tales is that upon her imminent death, the mother compels her husband to promise only to marry someone as beautiful as she is. After her death, the father, often delusional with grief, realizes his daughter is the only woman as beautiful

as her mother. The father wants to marry his daughter, the Cinderella character, and she must foil the plan by donning some sort of fur or animal skin in an attempt to hide her identity and beauty. Eventually she falls in love and plans a wedding. Through a turn of events, we find at the daughter's wedding, in Perrault's version *Donkey Skin* at least, "the bride's father, ...had purified the criminal and odious fires that had ignited his spirit in the past. The flame that was left in his soul had been transformed into devoted paternal love" (Perrault, *Beauty and the Beast* 69). And they lived happily every after. Considering the content, it is clear that children were not the original audiences for tales of this type and for this reason Disney, for example, did not perpetuate it. Devoid of a stepmother character, this type of Cinderella tale has not been as influential as the popularized version. Perhaps the lack of a clear antagonist is to be attributed to this. The 'coming of age' moment in this type of tale is when she reconciles her relationship with her father. Her marriage signifies that she has reached sexual maturity and she is able to interact with her father on a paternal level. It helps that he no longer is seeking her sexually, and their interaction has progressed and evolved into an appropriate, healthy father/daughter relationship.

The second group of Cinderella tales includes what is called the "King Lear" type tales. Speaking of this tale Alan Dundes notes, "...surely there is no more famous literary use of a version of Cinderella than

Shakespeare's *King Lear*" (Dundes 229). Exemplary of this type of tale is *Cap o' Rushes,* also known as *Love Like Salt.*

In this tale, the King asks his three daughters which loves him the most. The youngest daughter, the Cinderella figure, tells her father, "Why, I love you as fresh meat loves salt!" (Haviland 82). Blindly, thinking she has insulted him, the father casts her from his home. The Cinderella figure eventually falls in love and anonymously invites her father to the wedding. In an attempt to reveal her identity to her father, she instructs that all food at the wedding reception be prepared without salt. Upon tasting the food, tasteless without salt, his eyes become opened and he states, "I had a daughter, whom I loved very much. When I asked her how much she loved me, she said, 'As much as fresh meat loves salt.' I turned her away from my door, for I thought she didn't love me. Now I see that she loved me best of all" (Haviland 91). Cap o' Rushes quickly reveals herself, and, of course, they live happily ever after. Again, lacking a stepmother character, few people identify this tale as a version of the renowned Cinderella fairy tale. The maturation process comes to fruition in this tale when the truth and sincerity of the Cinderella character is discovered. She reconciles her relationship with her father and is able to interact with him on an adult level. Again, because of the marriage, sexual maturity is implied as a reinforcement that she has indeed 'come of age.'

The third type, and certainly the most famous, is the stepmother antagonist type. This type is most commonly associated with the Cinderella tale. This tale is known under familiar names such as *Cinderwench, Cinderella, Aschenputtel, Ashypet, Cendrillion, Cenerentola* and others.

In this tale, the natural mother dies and the father, who is often a common man, remarries a woman who already has two other daughters. She quickly becomes the ultimate antagonist when she mistreats Cinderella. Often Cinderella is aided by a fairy godmother or some other supernatural source, a mother figure replacement, in order to deal with and counterbalance the stepmother's evil character. Through her beauty, goodness, and patience, Cinderella is able to prevail and eventually marry the 'handsome prince.' And, again, they live happily ever after. Although hundreds if not thousands of versions of this tale exist, this is the most popular in our culture today. The 'coming of age' moment in this type of tale is signified by an independence from the stepmother. Often this is accompanied by some sort of revelation of the inherent evil of the stepmother and stepsisters. Consistently, the goal for Cinderella is to separate herself from the influence of the stepmother. This 'coming of age' act is also often supplemented by a marriage to a prince.

The first two types of this tale, contrary to the third, have a conspicuous father presence. In fact, the tales revolve around the

father/daughter relationship. The third type, however, and the one we are most familiar with, requires a virtually nonexistent father in order for the plot to unfold. Notably, the father/daughter conflict often stems from some uncharacteristic lapse in judgment and, in each case, the audience is simply waiting for him to come to his senses.

The stepmother type, however, and the one most persistent in society, revolves its conflict around the inherent disdain for the stepmother figure. The only way for the conflict to be resolved is for the stepmother to die, or for Cinderella to be removed, often by a prince, from her association. Hope that the stepmother will "come to her senses" is not presented as a viable solution. While the father is given hope of change, the stepmother is consistently a static, evil figure in the tale. This, unfortunately, is the tale popularized for children whom to this day inherit the wicked-stepmother motif from it, much to the regret of real flesh and blood stepmothers. Often, people do not associate *King Lear* with a Cinderella-type tale. And even fewer have ever heard of *Cap O' Rushes.*

The *Cinderella* tale, like virtually all fairy tales, has adhered to an essential recipe of character archetypes. Consistently, the primary characters include an absent father, a stepmother, two stepsisters, the Cinderella character, and a representation of the biological mother. In

this paper, this fusion of characters and how they directly influence or are influenced by the stepmother will be considered.

Certainly, hundreds of years ago, this tale entertained; certainly, it instructed. Everyone recognizes the virtue of patience and kindness encouraged by the eventuality of the *Cinderella* character. Yet what other underlying lessons are taught? And have these lessons persisted down to our day? Most importantly, if they presumably reflect society today, how do they affect how we feel about and relate to the motifs that are realized in our culture?

**Stepmother**

Even surpassing the character of Cinderella, the 'wicked stepmother' has become the most identifiable figure of the tale. This is because, while little girls wish they were Cinderella, they know she is a character of fiction. On the other hand, the unnamed antagonist, because she is not a particular character but a portrayal of all women who fall into her pseudo-mother role, is reflected in every woman who serves as a stepmother. In short, there are no real Cinderellas, but there are plenty of very real stepmothers.

Only in relatively recent history have families served more than a utilitarian purpose. Roles in the family were quite basic; fathers hunted and worked, women handled the infants and household, and children often were considered laborers as early as possible. If a father and

widower found himself without a wife, it was his responsibility to fill that role with a woman.

Think, too, of the widow. A woman who had few skills outside of the domestic realm needed a provider for any children she may have. Also, living in a male dominated society, upon her husband's death she quickly found her family handicapped and helpless. It was the alliance of a widower with children and a widow with children that would bring two predicaments into an effective unit once again. This pragmatic arrangement was quite common. This is the family composition that provided fertile ground for literary imaginations. Yet, if stepmothers are far from rare throughout history and were such a practical necessity, why has the 'wicked stepmother' motif become so enduring?

The terms 'wicked' and 'evil', while rather harsh words for a substitute mother position, allude to the concept of neglect. Often, it is the stepmother's lack of nurture or emotional care that characterizes the antagonist in the *Cinderella* tale. Neglect, along with a desire for the harm of the Cinderella character, is the foundation for the 'wicked' stereotype.

The role this tale played in society is clear; the *Cinderella* tale directly served to prepare a young girl for whatever female family members might be introduced into her home. The overall message was that kindness and diligence would pay off in the end. If this is the case,

modern tellings would reflect the same sensitivity to cultural demands and expectations.

Stepmothers in society today are quite abundant. Surprisingly, in comparing the numbers of children who were deprived of one or both parents in the nineteenth and earlier centuries, the twentieth-century figures are remarkably similar. The cause of the role is quite different, however, than a few hundred years ago. Donna Smith notes, "In previous generations...death was far more likely to be the reason a child lost a parent than parental separation and divorce." She continues, "Children may be losing parents at a comparable rate in contemporary society, but most of those parents continue to live" (12). If the numbers and basic form of the families are similar, why should it be expected that the stepmother figure would be reflected any differently today?

Foremost, as previously mentioned, family structure was not based upon love. It was based upon necessity, often for survival. Marriage for love was a frivolous concept. Considering that fairy tales primarily emerged from everyday experiences and beliefs, these stereotypes very well could be based upon concrete realities. Women did not necessarily have deep emotional ties to the man they were marrying; understandably then, their emotional ties to the children brought into this union may be in question.

But, what of today? Certainly marriage is presumably based upon love and respect. Men and women alike have more choices than ever. Women have the luxury of marrying for love, and children who are brought from previous marriages are calculated into the overall equation of a loving family. Seemingly, we ultimately live in a more enlightened society which supports the selfless efforts of a stepmother to take on, of her own free will, the burden of raising children. It is, quite possibly, the preeminent benevolent act. Therefore, it stands to reason that literature, especially fairy tales or works adapted to the fairy tale motifs, would reflect even token appreciation for the problematic yet selfless path that this woman has chosen.

A look into contemporary fairy tales, specifically the Cinderella tale, will provide a measure for the stepmother figure and how she has evolved throughout the development of the character and ends at a time when women in general are more equal, less likely to be thought of as inherently evil, and stepmothers in particular are understood to take up the responsibility of children not their own through love, not cold necessity. This glimpse will take a look at four well-respected writers of today. Writers in the fantasy genre include Jane Yolen and the late Angela Carter. In the horror genre, tales written by Peter Straub and Tanith Lee are examined.

In each of these, adult versions of the tale have been chosen. As alluded to earlier, children were not the primary audience of the fairy tale writer. In fact, the concept of "child" as we know it today was nonexistent during the time that folk and fairy tales were being patterned. Judith Hillman notes:

> In the Medieval world, there was no place for childhood. As soon as infants gained physical independence, they were expected to be supporting members of the family. To be sure, the life span of the populace was much shorter, as most individuals had to work for the most basic needs, food and shelter, and socialization into the adult world occurred very quickly for economic reasons. Seven-year-old children were apprenticed to craftsmen or taverners, or into the houses of aristocracy and landed gentry, if they managed to live through a treacherous childhood vulnerable to disease, the plague, poverty, and sometimes uncaring parents. (22)

Therefore, fairy tales were not created explicitly with children in mind. In fact, children were quite often secondary to the intention of the tales. The overall conception was that adults were adults and children were simply small adults. The questions remain-*who*, then, were they created for and *what* was the purpose?

Fairy tales were originally contrived for adult audiences. Because no distinction was made between adult and child, the audience would

also be made up of what were considered 'adult children.' These tales had a two-fold purpose. Obviously, they entertained during extensive hours of laborious and monotonous tasks such as weaving and sewing. Primarily, however, they came to be instructive tales warning and directing young girls through life's difficulties. Jack Zipes notes,

> The early oral tales which served as the basis for the development of literary fairy tales were closely tied to the rituals, customs, and beliefs of tribes, communities, and trades. They fostered a sense of belonging and hope that miracles involving some kind of magical transformation were possible to bring about a better world. They instructed, amused, warned, initiated, and enlightened. They opened windows to imaginative worlds inside that needed concrete expression outside in reality. They were to be shared and exchanged, used and modified according to the needs of the tellers and the listeners. (*When Dreams Come True* 2)

This communal employment of fairy tales in society created a universal tradition. Particular motifs became standard in particular tales. These tales were told repeatedly and eventually held a respectable position in the oral and literary traditions.

It is because of the established respectability in literary society that four modern day versions of the *Cinderella* tale have been chosen. If the theory that fairy tales evolve and change depending upon the teller and

the society around them holds true, fairy tales today should reflect a great enlightenment and advancement in regard to the stepmother and women in general. Because the fairy tales examined in this survey are not as widely known as the traditional version, ample portions of the text are included to present a cohesive portrayal of the individual tales.

## CHAPTER TWO

## FANTASY

Fantasy is a literary genre which continues to redefine itself. From *The Wizard of Oz* to *Star Wars,* fantasy is used as an all-encompassing term. It is often called an abstract expansion on or disconnect from reality. The *Encyclopedia of Fantasy,* in describing what fantasy literature is, says most people feel, "You know it's a fantasy when you see it." More specifically, however, a definition of fantasy is:

> ...a self-coherent narrative which, when set in our reality, tells a story which is impossible in the world as we perceive it; when set in an otherworld or secondary world, that otherworld will be impossible, but stories set there will be possible *in the otherworld's terms.* An associated point hinted at here, is that at the core of fantasy is story. Even the most surrealist of fantasies tells a tale. (Clute viii)

Certainly using this definition of the literary genre, original *Cinderella* tales, including their ghost mother references and magical dresses, serve as a typical example of the fairy tale sub-genre born of fantasy literature.

Writers respected today in the fantasy genre include Jane Yolen and Angela Carter, both of whom have written a contemporary version of

the Cinderella tale. A look into how each writer has developed the stepmother motif in her tale reveals a surprising lack of evolution reflecting the sociological advancement of the character. This is quite remarkable considering the aforementioned reflection of society that made original fairy tales both timely and providential. Each writer incorporates familiar character archetypes into her story, an absent father, stepmother, and oppressed young girl to name a few. It is how these characters are developed and how they influence one another that make these tales distinctive.

Additionally, power struggles of the past are the power struggles of the literary present. The same triad of characters, namely Cinderella, the biological mother, and the stepmother, continue to generate conflict in Cinderella tales today. Notice in the following analysis of tales by Jane Yolen and Angela Carter the underlying similarities of the mother's connection with nature, Cinderella's ability to negotiate between nature, the supernatural and reality, and finally, the stepmother's timeless character development, or lack thereof.

The theme that runs through each of these tales and in every Cinderella tale in general is the idea of the Cinderella character coming of age. Ultimately, the pivotal moment or turning point is when she makes public her internal power. This internal power takes on various forms. Often this moment is when the Cinderella character begins a new life

independent of the stepmother but with the guidance and help of the spirit of the natural mother. In two of the stories presented, the power is productive and leads to autonomy and independence. In the final two, the same personal power is destructive and leads to the death of innocent characters.

**Jane Yolen**

Jane Yolen, writer of the most fantastical of the selections to be discussed in this chapter, penned the short story "The Moon Ribbon" less than twenty-five years ago. She is widely respected and celebrated and has been called 'the Hans Christian Anderson of America.' Writing for adults and children, she has taken many original fairy tales and given them a feel of heightened fantasy. "The Moon Ribbon" presents a modification of the Cinderella tale.

The coming of age theme is evident in "The Moon Ribbon." In this tale, this pinnacle manifests itself at the end of the tale when Sylva refuses to give the red jewel, symbolic of her own heart, to her stepmother. Until this point she has given too freely to the selfish woman. The stepmother did not prove worthy of the gifts of herself that Sylva had given. This selfishness leads to her taking the ribbon from Sylva and greedily desiring the jewels or 'gifts' that Sylva possessed. The stepmother's judgment is clear; the earth swallows her. Death is a pivotal point in this tale;

however, the stepmother causes her own death. Sylva's coming of age moment happens before the death of her stepmother. She establishes herself as independent of her stepmother. Her personal power is presented as the ability to forgive the transgressions of her stepmother, yet she understands her own worth by not giving away her own heart. Sylva crosses the line from being an immature giver to a mature keeper of her own heart and resources. She has learned to give to the worthy.

This tale employs virtually all of the character archetypes that have made the *Cinderella* tale famous. The primary characters include an absent father, a stepmother, two stepsisters, the Cinderella character, and a representation of the biological mother. This volatile yet undeviating combination consistently provides fertile ground for the emergence of a uniform antagonist.

In "The Moon Ribbon," Sylva is a young girl who has suffered the loss of her mother. The story is set "by the forest's edge." Bruno Bettelheim suggests that the imagery of the "forest in which we get lost has symbolized the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world of our unconscious" (94). But Yolen sets this tale on the forest's "edge" symbolizing Sylva's nearness to enlightenment. She is not deep in the forest and completely lost; she is at the threshold of being 'found' or finding herself. Equally, if she does not learn the lessons that the universe

offers, she could easily slip into a state of being 'lost' psychologically and emotionally.

The setting is ripe for the reader to incorporate assumptions and personal flavor. Few absolute details are provided; for example, one of the only particulars given to the reader is that the characters live in a 'big house.' In fairy tale lore, castles and cottages have strong interpretive meaning; however, a 'big house' implies middle class affluence. Yolen allows the reader to incorporate a bit of reality into this fantasy through her description of the house. Cottages, in fairy tale literature, often refer to a simple, almost meager, existence. Castles, on the other hand, refer to inherent influence and an enviable lifestyle. Therefore, the 'big house', while not specific in description, is a phrase that suggests the family is part of the bourgeoisie.

The time in which this tale is set is consistent with most fairy tales; it is set during a nondescript time that encourages the reader to insert elements of the tale as needed in order to identify with the characters. The time setting for this and most tales is open to interpretation. The reader is able happily to include self-created and often unconscious notions into the structure of the tale. The only inkling Yolen does give us regarding the time period is at the very end of the tale when we are told, "the stepmother gathered up her skirts...." The concept of a female wearing

'skirts' certainly does not lend itself to a modern day interpretation; however, identifying a specific date is unlikely.

A synopsis of the tale reveals great similarity with the traditional Cinderella tale through Yolen's character development. While the story may be quite different, the characters employed demonstrate striking connection with the motivations and actions of the traditional tale. Sylva, the Cinderella character, lives with her widowed father. He is presented as an ineffectual yet kind man. This harmless man marries a woman with two daughters. These women, Sylva's stepmother along with her daughters, reveal themselves to be evil and unkind. Sylva's mother is only alluded to, yet her desire to nurture transcends death through the magical ribbon left for Sylva.

One fascinating feature of this tale is the concept of female giving. The house in which Sylva and her father live, as Yolen makes clear, was owned by Sylva's mother. Establishing that the house in which they live was originally Sylva's mother's and was only passed along to her father upon her mother's death reveals female dominance that is in effect throughout the tale. Sylva is to learn the lesson of giving her heart. However, she is instructed to be careful to whom she gives her heart. The lesson clearly laid out by Yolen is that good women give carefully and generously. Hateful women, such as Sylva's stepmother, hoard. The

initial lesson begins in the natural mother's giving of a magical ribbon to Sylva.

The ribbon left by her mother is the key to Sylva's growth. Reaching emotional maturity, or her 'coming of age' moment, is facilitated by the experiences that the magical ribbon provides. One day, while dusting, Sylva discovers a silver ribbon of hair left to her by her mother. This ribbon magically brings her to two experiences in which a mother/sister figure is revealed to her. In the first incident she is shown to a river designed to transport her to a tall woman with silver hair. She jumps into the river hoping it will "wash away her sorrows." In this instance she hears nothing and can smell nothing. The river carries her to a home where she meets a woman who gives her a crystal that is later revealed to Sylva as the woman's heart. The 'crystal' heart represents purity and goodness. Upon her return to 'reality', Sylva gives the crystal to her stepmother. The stepmother quickly rids herself of its purity and goodness by selling the crystal.

Sylva's second experience with this 'fantasy' world is presented to her the very next day as a road. This time, Sylva is expected to put forth effort and walk down the road. She begins the trek and is aided by supernatural powers that accelerate the speed of her journey. She is able to hear and smell in this experience and she again meets the magical woman. She is presented with a warm red jewel which represents her

own heart and is given the directive to be careful to whom she gives it. It is here that the reader is given the lesson of the tale:

"No one can take unless you give."

"I had no choice."

"There is always a choice," the woman said. (22)

The magical woman guides Sylva to the realization that only if one allows another to take from one emotionally or spiritually can he or she harm one. If one does not allow it, it cannot happen. A final message in this tale is the universal lesson that ultimately evil will be overcome by good. The stepmother and stepsisters attempt to make the magical journey facilitated by the ribbon. However, they are guided into the earth to receive their judgment.

A more detailed look at the tale is revealing of the coming of age experience influenced by an antagonistic stepmother. The tale opens as most Cinderella tales do:

> There was once a plain but good-hearted girl named Sylva whose sole possession was a ribbon her mother had left her. It was a strange ribbon, the color of moonlight, for it had been woven from the gray hairs of her mother and her mother's mother and her mother's mother's mother before her.

> Sylva lived with her widowed father in a great house by the forest's edge. Once the great house had belonged to her mother, but when she died, it became Sylva's father's house to do with as he willed. And what he willed was to live simply and happily with his daughter without thinking of the day to come. (16)

Yolen presents the magical ribbon as a substitution for the traditional fairy godmother. Working its charm, the ribbon is able to transform Sylva's meager reality into an enchanted state of delight. The ribbon is to be a constant reminder of the natural mother's desire to nurture and care for her daughter. Not only does the ribbon provide escape from a miserable existence, but also it is key in imparting life lessons to Sylva. Certainly a natural mother would hope to grant such gifts to her daughter, and Sylva's mother does this through the charmed ribbon. It is vital to establish the symbolism and importance of the ribbon early, because through interactions with Sylva and the ribbon, the actual motivations and desires of characters are revealed.

The plot develops:

> But one day, when there was little enough to live on, and only the great house to recommend him, Sylva's father married again, a beautiful widow who had two beautiful daughters of her own.

> It was a disastrous choice, for no sooner were they wed when it was apparent the woman was mean in spirit and meaner in tongue. She dismissed most of the servants and gave their chores over to Sylva, who followed her orders without complaint. For simply living in her mother's house with her loving father seemed enough for the girl.
>
> After a bit, however, the old man died in order to have some peace, and the house passed on to the stepmother. Scarcely two days had passed, or maybe three, when the stepmother left off mourning the old man and turned on Sylva. She dismissed the last of the servants without their pay. (16-17)

Yolen here uses several methods to elicit compassion for Sylva. First, she is characterized as plain and having only one 'sole' possession. The ribbon her mother had given her prior to her death is the only remembrance Sylva has of her mother. Sylva wants only to live happily with her father, and her sweet father only wants to live happily and simply with his daughter. Within the first five paragraphs, however, the man remarries and then wills himself to die, we are to understand, in an effort to free himself of the company of his new wife, Sylva's stepmother. Now, not only is Sylva a stepdaughter but also an orphan. The reader has no option but to commiserate with the young girl.

As character development goes in fantasy and fairy tale lore, when there is pure good in a character, there is often pure wickedness in another. Sylva's stepmother serves as the antithesis of her natural mother. Yet to be presented, the stepmother will mete out her resentment upon the ribbon, and thus the natural mother, for the plot to unfold. Yolen has set the scene in favor of the nurturing, caring biological mother. With this assessment of the character in place, little is needed to persuade the reader that her replacement, the stepmother, is quite similar to the wicked stereotype that was prepared for her long ago. Sylva and her natural mother represent complete goodness and purity. The opposing characters, and thus character traits, to these women are found in the stepmother and stepsisters.

Yolen further emphasizes the goodness of Sylva by stating that she follows the unreasonable orders set forth by her stepmother 'without complaint.' The consistent emphasis of Sylva's benevolent character only serves to enhance the inherent evil of her rival, her stepmother.

Yolen develops the stepmother in much the way writers of the past have presented the woman. She is unreasonable, unyielding, and entirely unconcerned for the well-being of her new husband or her stepdaughter Sylva. In 'wicked stepmother' form, she waits for the perfect opportunity to 'turn' on the angelic girl. This opportunity comes after she has driven poor Sylva's loving father into the ground. Moreover, in an added

attempt by Yolen to emphasize the character's evil, she dismisses the servants 'without pay.' Quickly the scene is set in favor of Sylva and against the stepmother.

A device often used to arouse subconscious ire for the stepmother character is the idea of only being named by her position. The term "the stepmother" allows adequate emotional distance between the reader and the character to grant the reader further antipathy for the woman. Yolen exemplifies how the lack of using a given name can cause emotional distance:

> "Girl," she called out, for she never used Sylva's name, "you will sleep in the kitchen and do the charring." And from that time on it was so. (17)

Poor Sylva not only must sleep in the kitchen but she also has to live in a home where she is relegated to the position of being called 'girl' by her own family. The stepmother, a woman also without a name, is considered cruel in her attempt to add insult to injury. Somehow, the reader feels that a woman so overwhelmingly diabolical deserves no proper name, but how harsh for her to take away Sylva's.

The tale goes on to tell of the magical ribbon and how Sylva's mother figure is able to care for her child through its power. Eventually, Sylva is made to sleep 'outside with the animals'. Again, we are told, she does not complain, but she is happy to be able to sleep near her mother's

house. The ribbon given to her by her mother carries her to magical places where she feels loved and experiences her mother's presence.

When Sylva returns from her fantastical experiences, her hair and eyes glow like silver. She carries with her a red jewel that symbolizes her heart. The stepmother and stepsisters are envious of the jewel she bears with her.

The stepmother demands that Sylva give her the magical ribbon:

> Sylva handed her the ribbon, but she was not fooled by her stepmother's tone.
>
> The moment the silver ribbon lay prickly and limp in the stepmother's hand, she looked up triumphantly at Sylva. Her face broke into a wolfish grin. "Fool," she said, "the magic is herein. With this ribbon there are jewels for the taking." She marched out of the door, and the stepsisters hurried behind her.
>
> Sylva walked after them, but slowly, stopping in the open door.
>
> The stepmother flung the ribbon down. In the early morning sun it glowed as if with a cold flame.
>
> "Say the words, girl," the stepmother commanded.
>
> From the doorway Sylva whispered:
>
> Silver ribbon, silver hair,
> Lead the ladies with great care,
> Lead them to their home.

> The silver ribbon wriggled and writhed in the sunlight, and as they watched, it turned into a silver-red stair that went down into the ground.
>
> "Wait," called Sylva. "Do not go." But it was too late.
>
> With a great shout, the stepmother gathered up her skirts and ran down the steps, her daughters fast behind her. And before Sylva could move, the ground had closed up after them and the meadow was as before. (24)

Certainly, the punishment of the stepmother and sisters is deserved. The implication, clearly, of going 'down' into the earth is that they received appropriate judgment for their evil actions. Yolen also here enhances Sylva's goodness by having her attempt to stop the hateful women. But their judgement, as with all evil characters in a good fairy tale, must come to pass.

Despite an effort to adapt and update the tale, Jane Yolen writes unwittingly into the trap of presumed stereotype. In an essay one year after the publication of "Moon Ribbon," she argues that people have the wrong perception of the Cinderella character. She feels the girl is not given appropriate credit for using her cunning. Yolen asserts that actually the Cinderella character historically is very proactive in her rescue from the punishment inflicted upon her by her evil stepmother: "She makes

intelligent decisions for she knows that wishing solves nothing without the concomitant action" (Yolen 298). She continues, "To make Cinderella less than she is, then, is a heresy of the worst kind. It cheapens our most cherished dreams..." (299). Yolen may certainly argue this, but her Cinderella tale falls short of her theory.

Sylva shows little spirit in attempting to relieve herself of the conditions under which she must live. Only minimally does Yolen adapt the Cinderella tale by empowering Sylva with the fortitude to dispute her stepmother's original request for the ribbon:

> "Oh, please. It was my mother's. She left it for me. Please let me keep it," begged Sylva. (18)

This is one of the only examples of courage displayed in Sylva's 'real world.' Consistently, Sylva is portrayed as a reactive character. In a moment of despair, she "threw herself to the ground in tears." And often we are told she "never complained," as if a failure to complain of injustice is a virtue. In Yolen and Sylva's defense, however, Sylva does make leaps of faith while in her fantasy world. The ribbon creates a river and she jumps in without hesitation. Nevertheless, one would imagine, without the aid of the magical ribbon, Sylva would have lived a life of silent misery and despair. Therefore, despite the independent and clever character Yolen claims she creates, even the Cinderella character herself falls into the path prepared for her by fairy tale creators of the past.

The stereotype of the Cinderella character presented as 'patient, kind, and long-suffering' is so entrapping, it is difficult even for a well-intentioned writer to escape. Therefore, it is no surprise that the stepmother character also continually succumbs to this precise stereotypical pitfall. Her evil ways have changed little since her inception over a thousand years ago. As with the Cinderella character, the stepmother stereotype, making words such as "evil" and "wicked" inherent in her character, has been so subconsciously entrenched, even with conscious effort, it is difficult to negotiate. Interestingly, as we will see, few writers have successfully attempted to alter the famous motif.

**Angela Carter**

Angela Carter is widely respected as a fairy tale and fantasy writer. She also often writes incorporating a feminist agenda. Carter's *Ashputtle: or, The Mother's Ghost* written in 1983, is a short-short story (barely two pages) telling a highly modified version of the Cinderella tale.

In the Angela Carter tale the young girl decides she wants the man that the stepmother has picked for herself. Her 'coming of age' moment occurs when she tells a cow that she wants the man and then the mother's ghost presents a series of attempts to care for the girl. The cow puts down milk for the girl to drink and bathe, the cat combs her hair with its claws, and finally a bird bleeds on the girl to create a dress. Ashputtle 'comes of

age' when she desires to be independent of the stepmother and summons the courage to request the aid of the mother's ghost even though her actions imply that she must have male affirmation of her worth. She then presents herself to the man and they leave the home for the stepmother to do her own work. She has become independent; although the dichotomy evolves that she is now seemingly dependent upon the man. The ghost of the mother then rests as she sees her task of getting her daughter to womanhood is complete. Ashputtle is believed to have crossed the threshold into emotional and sexual maturity as indicated by her desire to have the 'man'.

Carter opens the tale with graphic description of Ashputtle. The Cinderella character is, among other things, "burned, charred, scabbed and scarred." In an expression of mourning, Ashputtle lives "on the hearth, covered in ashes" (301). As always, the stepmother nemesis quickly comes into the picture:

> After her mother died and was buried, her father forgot the mother and forgot the child and married the woman who used to rake the ashes and that was why the child lived in the unraked ashes and there was nobody to brush her hair so it stuck out like a mat nor to wipe the dirt off her scabbed face and she had no heart to do it for herself but she raked the ashes and slept beside the little cat and got the burned bits from the bottom of the pot to eat,

> scraping them out, squatting on the floor, by herself in front of the fire, not as if she were human, because she was still in mourning. (301)

Immediately it is established that the father is an ineffective character. He is never mentioned again in the tale. Carter never insinuates judgment one way or the other on the absent man. However, she does imply cruelty on the stepmother's part by suggesting that, while the girl has a stepmother, the woman will not even comb the poor girl's hair or wipe her face. She is evidently devoid of any nurturing characteristics and hardly deserving of any title with 'mother' in it. Again, as with Yolen, the stepmother is given no proper name. This seemingly minor detail works to distance the reader further from the character.

The ghost of the natural mother must take various forms in order to care for the poor girl. Initially, the mother's ghost inhabits a cow in order to give the girl milk to drink. Carter mentions, "...and time passed and she grew fat, she grew breasts, she grew up." The plot thickens:

> There was a man the stepmother wanted and she asked him into the kitchen to give him his dinner but she let the burned child cook it although the stepmother did all the cooking, once upon a time. After the burned child cooked the dinner the stepmother sent her off to milk the cow.

"I want that man for myself," said the burned child to the cow. (302)

The cow then puts down enough milk for the girl to wash herself. The mother's ghost then takes the form of a cat for the girl's hair to be combed with his paws; finally, the mother's ghost makes use of a bird; the bird then strikes its own breast and bleeds a red silk dress upon the girl.

The burned child went into the kitchen to show herself to the man. She was not burned any more, but lovely. The man left off looking at the stepmother and looked at the girl.

"Come home with me and let your stepmother rake the ashes," he said to her and off they went. He gave her a house and money. She did all right. (303)

Unlike Yolen's, Carter's Cinderella character is never named specifically, save in the title. However, they are consistent in only naming the stepmother by her position. Both of the natural mothers come to the girl in supernatural form to take care of her and to nurture her, since the stepmother consistently neglects to care for the girl physically or emotionally.

Notably, Angela Carter, known for her feminist views, seems to abandon many of them in this tale. It appears feminine weakness is rewarded. Ashputtle tells a cow that she is interested in a man. Then, when she is miraculously made beautiful, she "shows herself" to him in

an effort to gain his approval. Also, Carter says, "He gave her a house and money" (303). Certainly, Carter's creation of such a character is puzzling in a writer who retells fairy tales through a "feminist consciousness." Her readiness to treat the stepmother harshly implies that Angela Carter may not be the conscientious feminist writer concerned with positive female characters that she presents herself to be. Or, perhaps dismissing her personal and political agenda is an elementary way of explaining the irony of Carter's writing.

A provocative theory asserted by Allison Lee in her book simply titled *Angela Carter* suggests that Carter is not duplicating the stereotypes, but, instead, she is working from within the genre to expose its conspiracies. Her method is "not to replace the assumptions it questions, [because] the very act of questioning has a subversive potential" (Lee 16). She adds, "Historical and literary contexts are important to Carter because her aim is to draw the reader's attention to the way in which those contexts have determined the way we think" (14). As a social statement, she emphasizes the stepmother's detachment from husband and child.

Her statement generates a feeling of absurd unnaturalness. For example, the reader must reconcile his natural desire to nurture with the unashamed and calculated lack of nurturing by the stepmother. The exasperation that the stepmother produces through her lack of care for the girl is contrasted with the ghost of the mother who is able to nurture the

child through abstract means. The proverbial rug is pulled out from under the realism of the "wicked stepmother." If the ghost is realistically unable to take on different forms, perhaps the ire felt for the stepmother is equally without foundation. Carter presents this predicament as a signal that unrealistic expectations and stereotypes have been blindly accepted by a gullible society.

Considering the lack of strong, positive female characters, Cinderella or the stepmother, it is disheartening that Angela Carter, in an effort to release women from social stereotypes, does not use this brief but poignant tale to unambiguously dispel the myths. Instead, her method of presentation does little, if anything, but reaffirm that stepmothers are self-centered and cruel.

**Nature**

Peculiar to virtually all Cinderella tales is the fact that nature is the fixed medium for Cinderella to negotiate between reality and the supernatural. Consistently, Cinderella's biological mother is presented or accessed through nature or some other organic representation. In the Grimms' tale, Cinderella finds the manifestation of her mother through a twig that her father brings home to her. In Perrault's version of the tale, Cinderella's nurturing fairy godmother engages a pumpkin and mice, among other such things, as ingredients for a magical event. Therefore, it is no surprise, in *The Moon Ribbon,* that the ribbon of hairs from the heads

of Sylva's mother and grandmothers is the medium for her to access a supernatural world which connects her to her mother. Additionally, in Angela Carter's tale, the mother is manifest in nurturing by various animals.

Each of these natural materializations is unable to be negotiated or controlled by the stepmother. The stepmother is representative of reality. The biological mother represents nature and, an extension of that, the supernatural. Reality and the supernatural are parallel concepts that only Cinderella can arbitrate. This theme is consistent throughout the evolution of the Cinderella tale and continues to proliferate in contemporary tales.

The consistent emphasis and conflict is on the mother/daughter and the stepmother/stepdaughter relationship. The mother in each tale is a supernatural representation of sorts. Her tangible manifestation in *The Moon Ribbon* is the magical ribbon; in *Ashputtle: or, The Mother's Ghost,* the mother manifests herself in the form of material nurturing through animals. She combs the girl's hair, provides milk, and gives her a red dress. Indeed, this is accomplished with the assistance of animals, a symbol of her connection with the natural world. Both tales unambiguously present the message "natural mothers nurture, even at great cost, but stepmothers do not." In fact, the stories suggest a

stepmother will go out of her way in pursuit of cruelty, even when kindness is in her own best interest.

## Archetypes

By virtue of the length of her tale, Angela Carter fails to develop fully the anticipated characters of traditional *Cinderella* tales. There are no stepsisters, and the absent father merits only one line of the account. Jane Yolen, on the other hand, takes time to allow these characters to evolve more fully. Still, there are comparisons to be made between the tales of Angela Carter and Jane Yolen.

In *The Moon Ribbon*, Jane Yolen only gives peripheral reference to the father. He is used merely to establish the presence of the stepmother. Equally, this is the case with Angela Carter's father figure in *Ashputtle: or, The Mother's Ghost.* In each tale, no judgmental comment is directed toward the father's neglectful choice of a mother replacement. Indeed he is no more a parental figure than the stepmother. As in centuries past, this father continues immune from responsibility by literary society. Each writer fails to challenge the father on his obvious gap in personal character. In order to elicit further sympathy for the man, often he is killed off at the very beginning, as in Jane Yolen's tale, to find "some peace." Because of the well-established historical stereotypes of the

absent father, traditionally leaving early in the tale on a journey, each of these writers follows the simple formula of excusing or eliminating the father and villainizing the stepmother.

Along with a weak father role, the stepsisters often have very little influence over the outcome of the tale. Angela Carter evidences this in the total elimination of the characters.

The stepmother is unfortunately a static character in these tales. She begins and ends with evil and unkind characteristics. Yolen and Carter fail to use the opportunity to transform this woman into anything more than she has been over the past thousand years.

In these writings, Jane Yolen and Angela Carter fall sadly short of the crusaders for women's interests that it was hoped they would be. As Yolen presents a helpless Sylva, she asserts a powerful stepmother who controls and suppresses the poor girl. This, despite the fact that she proclaims to feel the Cinderella character is misunderstood and unjustly distorted into helplessness. Equally, Carter offers a Cinderella almost as powerless, who, through the help of her mother, manages to capture a man who will give her sustenance. Presumably, through this emphasis of the preconceptions of the tale, she exposes and inspires thought upon our attitudes and conventionalized ideas. While she may have intended to inspire thought, the tale varies little from the stereotypical evils of past stepmothers. Additionally, Angela Carter fails to give the clear direction

needed to examine the tale at a deeper level. These women, Angela Carter and Jane Yolen, follow the unfortunate pattern of the women of the French salons of the 17th Century. They fail to embrace an opportunity to empower a female character positively that has been suppressed by literary society for hundreds of years. In fact, each emphasizes the most powerful woman of her tale as the wicked stepmother.

The fantasy and horror genres are virtual literary cousins dealing with motifs of a fantastic nature. If the fantasy genre is not sympathetic to the stepmother, perhaps writers from the horror genre will present the stepmother in kinder light.

## CHAPTER THREE

## HORROR

The horror literary genre, also referred to as Gothic style, has made adaptations and contributions to the contemporary fairy tale. Often lumped together with fantasy, the horror genre attempts "to create the...atmosphere of brooding and unknown terror" (Holman 218). While both genres use elements of a fantastic nature, the element of psychological or realized terror is what separates horror from fantasy. Peter Straub and Tanith Lee have emerged from the horror genre to write contemporary versions of the Cinderella tale.

Manifestations of personal power, or the coming of age moments, take a dark turn in the horror tales by Peter Straub and Tanith Lee. In each of these tales, the Cinderella character is the source and cause of death to innocent victims. Mrs. Asch kills a young pre-school aged little girl, and Ashella kills the prince. These two women do not necessarily manifest independence as much as they internalize and buy into the destructive power that was patterned for them. The climactic moments of death, in the form of murder, manifest misguided personal power.

**Peter Straub**

Among the most disquieting, yet realistic contemporary Cinderella tales is a little known short story entitled "Ashputtle", by Peter Straub. Straub, influencing such authors as Stephen King, has established himself as a writer of psychological terror. And, certainly, he substantiates this identity in "Ashputtle."

"Ashputtle," of the tales chosen in this paper, is the most easily interpreted as modern day. Exact time and location are not presented, but many factors culminate to suggest a modern day setting for this tale. This tale is not fantastical horror but psychological horror. Mrs. Asch, the Cinderella character, is an overweight kindergarten teacher who certainly has her share of emotional disturbance. She reveals her anger at her mother for dying and her father for allegedly having a part in it. As the entire story is told through the voice of Mrs. Asch, character development is subjective. Not only is it governed by the emotional resentment toward the situation she has endured, it is influenced by her mental condition. Straub presents the realistic, though extreme, consequences of the Cinderella predicament. There is no magic in store for this little girl; often the only 'magic' she will know is her detachment from reality.

This tale presents a woman who is plagued by arrested emotional development. The intriguing feature of this tale is that Mrs. Asch, the Cinderella character, is in her fifties and seems never to have come to

terms with her mother's death or her father's choice for a second wife. She never has the characteristic, positive 'coming of age' moment wherein she realizes her potential and power. Instead she has a series of disturbing reactions to her own psychological demons stemming from her childhood experiences. Previously, the 'coming of age' moment is when the Cinderella character begins a new life independent of the stepmother but with the guidance and help of the spirit of the natural mother. This incident never occurs in this tale; in fact, Mrs. Asch seems to be in a holding pattern of emotional retardation. At fifty, she ruminates on the death of her mother as if it had happened recently, manifesting childishness distinctive of an emotionally disturbed nature. A turning point for her takes place when she kills the little girl Tori Zoeller. She takes the life of the little girl before Tori is able to live the privileged life that seems to be in her future. This is suggestive of the childhood that she feels was taken from her by her stepmother who was involved in the death of her mother.

In order to connect the story to that of the Cinderella tale, Straub tells the story by literally weaving the traditional fantasy tale into his modern day version. For example, after an extensive narration on her discipline style in the kindergarten classroom, she immediately begins to tell her family story through the voice of a fairy tale narrator; "(s)oon the king took another woman as his wife, and she was most beautiful, with

skin the color of gold and eyes as black as jet" (292). This transition in and out of reality takes on increased importance as the lack of mental stability in Mrs. Asch become more evident.

It is clear that her childhood is far from normal. Her mother dies unexpectedly. When mentioning her mother, Mrs. Asch fluctuates between calling her a 'queen' and then referring to her as a 'stone' deep inside her. This reference to a cold, lifeless, magic-less stone is clearly in contrast with the warm, ever-nurturing manifestations of the natural mother of other Cinderella tales.

The reader is never given the sense that Mrs. Asch's natural mother is attempting to nurture her by any supernatural means. This is in contrast with each of the stories presented thus far. From the Grimms to Perrault to Angela Carter, there has been some sense of the natural mother desiring posthumously to look after her daughter. The manifestations throughout literary history, until this tale, have ranged from a twig to a ribbon to a fairy godmother to a bleeding bird. This is not the case in the Straub tale. Rather, Mrs. Asch is not convinced, and seemingly has no reason to be convinced, of her mother's unconditional, undying love for her nor that her mother is perhaps attempting to care for her through some magical force.

Her father receives little development as a character and is implicated in the death of his first wife. At the telling of this tale by Mrs.

Asch, her father has died. As in many of the Cinderella tales, the father is presented as an ineffective, distant character. He is portrayed to be unconcerned with the well-being of his daughter to the point that he is willing to marry a woman who is uncommitted to caring for his biological daughter. While we are not given great detail on the matter, it seems that Mrs. Asch's father and stepmother Zena were jointly involved in the death of Mrs. Asch's mother.

The stepsisters seem to be of different temperaments than those presented in past Cinderella tales. It is probable that anyone else telling this story would have provided a more favorable interpretation of the stepsisters. They show concern for Mrs. Asch, but she internalizes their concern as "ice": "Those figments, those stepsisters, came to me and said *Don't you know that we want to help you?* They came to me and said *Can you tell us what your life is like?"* She responds with a disconcerting reaction, "When the figments called me *darling,* ice and snow stormed into my mouth and went pushing down my throat into my stomach, freezing everything" (282, 283). It becomes readily evident that the development of the characters is rather skewed as presented through the voice of Mrs. Asch. She wholeheartedly sifts their interest through a negative filter. The reader is never given the allusion that Mrs. Asch at any time entertains the idea that they may be genuinely concerned for her.

Zena, Mrs. Asch's stepmother, is a character who never receives full development. Instead, she is alluded to often as the inspiration for Mrs. Asch's occasional disconnects with reality. Straub quite intends for the reader to bring to this tale the "stepmother stereotype" that has been learned from fairy tales of the past. This reinforcement of the stereotype makes his references even more effective. For example, Mrs. Asch is described as obesely overweight. As a child, this Cinderella character would sneak into the kitchen and binge on bread and ice cream. To this fact, the reader links the following statement, "Zena knew all about my midnight feasts, but was quite indifferent to them" (295). Zena is seemingly undisturbed about the destructive course the young girl is on. The stereotype of the unconcerned, uncaring stepmother is reinforced.

Mrs. Asch, the Cinderella character, is far from the stereotypical helpless stepchild working pointlessly yet diligently in the ashes. Instead, she is the modern day product of a deceased mother, absent father, and destructive stepmother. Straub takes a realistic, though disturbing, look at a modern day Cinderella in her fifties. The psychological ramifications of such a tortured childhood are alluded to and emphasized in this tale. A past such as the Cinderella character experiences lends itself to an understandably troubled adulthood; however, the tone of this tale reveals unyielding anger and a sense of antagonism that has not been seen in other renditions of this tale.

Different from the other tales, the mother and father are given equal responsibility in the suffering that the girl must endure. Straub's clever retelling of the classic is accomplished primarily by insinuation. The vantage point of the reader is the mind of Mrs. Asch. She begins the pseudo-narration by revealing her thoughts and feelings about her life and teaching career:

> People think that teaching little children has something to do with helping other people, something to do with service. People think that if you teach little children, you must love them. People get what they need from thoughts like this.
>
> People think that if you happen to be very fat and are a person who acts happy and cheerful all the time, you are probably pretending to be that way in order to make them forget how fat you are, or cause them to forgive you for being so fat. They make this assumption, thinking you are so stupid that you imagine that you're getting away with this charade. From this assumption, they get confidence in the superiority of their intelligence over yours, and they get to pity you, too. (282)

What first appears cynical quickly turns disturbing. She reveals her resentment toward her stepsisters by calling them 'figments'. However, she appears to save her malevolence for her parental figures:

> When the figments called me *darling*, ice and snow stormed into my mouth and went pushing down my throat into my stomach, freezing everything. They didn't know I was nothing, I would never be like them; they didn't know that the only part of me that was nothing was a small hard stone right at the center of me.
>
> That stone has a name. MOTHER. (283)

In this brief excerpt of the tale, images such as ice, snow and a stone set the tone for the provocative psychological tale to be presented. This detailed look into the psyche of the Cinderella character is an angle much unused by other *Cinderella* tale writers. Throughout the tale, Straub alludes to the idea that Mrs. Asch feels abandoned by her dead mother. Later in the tale, she expounds upon the notion of her mother being a 'stone.' In a disturbing effort to insert herself into the original Cinderella tale, she describes, "Hatred is the inside part of love. And so her mother became a hard cold stone in her heart. And that was the meaning of the mother, for as long as the little girl lived" (292). It is not entirely clear, and quite possible, that her father and stepmother, Zena, had something to do with the mother's death. Her past gains greater dimension:

> Once, briefly there existed a golden time. My parents lived, and with them, I too was alive in the golden time. Our name was Asch, and in fact I am known now as Mrs. Asch, the Mrs. being

> entirely honorific, no husband having ever been in evidence nor ever likely to be. Mr. and Mrs. Asch did dwell together in the golden time, and both mightily did love their girl-child. And then, whoops, the girl-child's Mommy upped and died. The girl-child's Daddy buried her in the estate's churchyard, with the minister and everything, in the coffin and everything, with hymns and talking and crying and the animals standing around, and Zena, I remember, Zena was already there, even then. So that was how things were right from the start. (285)

The Cinderella figure feels entirely helpless. There is no fairy godmother in this tale, as in real life, to provide a magical conclusion. Instead, she is forced to negotiate her crippling history the best she can. Straub gives insight into her troubled mind and increases the suspicion that the stepmother had a hand in the mother's death:

> I am thinking of Zena and the time she told me that weeping on my mother's grave wouldn't make a glorious wonderful tree grow there, it would just drown my mother in mud. (289)
>
> My mother did not drown in mud. She died some other way. She fell down in the middle of the down-stairs parlor, the parlor where Zena sat on her visits. (289)

Because of her disguised mental unbalance, it is uncertain as to whether some references are literal to her or symbolic. She reveals:

> Both my mother and Zena were happening to me, and I was happening to them, too. Such is the world of women. My mother, deep in her mud-grave, hated Zena. Zena, second in the king's affections, hated my mother. Speaking from the center of the stone at the center of me, my mother frequently advised me on how to deal with Zena. Silently, speaking with her eyes, Zena advised me on how to deal with my mother. I, who had to deal with both of them, hated them both. (295-6)

It is quite possible that she felt her dead mother consulted her. In the most telling of events, she recounts the time when her disconnect with reality took its most dramatic form. Evidently happening more than once, one of her 'adventures in art' manifested itself in her smearing her own feces on her body and running into the yard naked. Most disturbing of all, she seems to imply that she was not as insane as she was misunderstood: "I thought of myself as a work of art. I caused responses without being responsible for them. This is the great freedom of art" (294). This lack of responsibility allows Mrs. Asch to detach from the culpability that would be expected when being directly responsible for a child's death.

Unfortunately, because she feels she has no other outlet for her expression and she is obviously mentally unbalanced, she evidently unburdens her psyche through her kindergarten students:

> Sometimes when I meet with one of these parents, say a fluffy-haired young lawyer, say named Arnold Zoeller, Arnold and his wife Kathi, Kathi with an i, mind you, sometimes when I sit behind my desk and watch these two slim, handsome people struggle to keep the pity and contempt out of their well-cared for faces, I catch that gratitude heating up behind their eyes.
>
> Arnold and Kathi believe that a pathetic old lumpo like me must love their lovely little girl, a girl say named Tori, Tori with an i (for Victoria.) And I think I do rather love little Tori Zoeller, yes I think I do think I love that little girl. My mother would have loved her, too. And that's the God's truth.
>
> I can see myself in the world, in the middle of the world.
>
> I see that I am the same as all nature. (284)

Her reference to her mother is an ominous detail that is the first step into an increasingly unsettling twist to the tale:

> Lately, within the past twenty-four hours, a child has been lost.
>
> A lost child lies deep within the ashes, her hands and feet mutilated, her face destroyed by fire. She has partaken of the great adventure, and now she is the same as all nature. (299)

This child is the student earlier referred to, Tori Zoeller. Mrs. Asch describes how she helps a search effort for the girl, but seems to laugh

derisively at the fact that the parents find comfort in the hope that she may be found. Mrs. Asch implies that she knows more than the parents about their daughter's condition, yet she puts on a pretense of empathy and helps to put up posters and look for the girl. Straub surreally suggests that the Cinderella figure had more than a little to do with the girl's disappearance. Ominously, Mrs. Asch almost justifies the death/disappearance of the kindergarten-aged girl:

> A child of certain limitation has been lost. She could never learn to tie her cute but oddly blunt-looking size 1 running shoes, and eventually had to become resigned to the sort fastened with Velcro straps. Her reading skills were somewhat, though not seriously, below average. She could recite the alphabet all in a rush, by rote, but when questioned, was incapable of remembering if **O** came before or after **S**. I doubt that she would have been capable of mastering long division during the appropriate academic term. (301)

It is as if the ugly, fat, neglected child within Mrs. Asch resented the pretty, much-loved Tori Zoeller. Her attitude also enhances the conclusion that she had a hand in Tori's disappearance.

"Ashputtle" accurately reflects the psychological challenges a person would face under dysfunctional familial conditions. Her mother's death was evidently no accident. She blames her father and stepmother

for the tragedy. Straub has presented a tale devoid of fantasy; instead, he offers what would have really happened to a girl with a dead mother, evil stepmother, and absent father. He intensifies his tale with the dimension of mental instability on the part of the main character. As examined earlier, the mother in the Cinderella tale usually takes on a supernatural form. In this tale, she takes on an equally mystical identity as the conflicted creation in the Cinderella character's mind.

It is quite notable that the stepmother is the only person in the tale, aside from peripheral characters, who is given a proper first name. The name 'Zena', however, provokes powerful images of a warrior princess, not nurturing motherly images of someone who bakes cookies every Thursday afternoon. If Peter Straub does not stifle the wickedness of the stepmother, at least he takes a realistic look at the consequences of her actions in the plot. Rarely do audiences stop to think what would have happened if everyone had not lived 'happily ever after.' Straub has delved into the dark side of the aftereffect of such a tumultuous predicament in a young woman's life.

Peter Straub could have written this tale about any unfortunate and disturbed young woman. The use of the Cinderella theme works to pull the reader in and place him in the literary frame of mind that makes the tale effective. Sympathy and stereotypes fall right where he would like them to be. As soon as the reader identifies this as a Cinderella tale, he

begins to look for the familiar motifs. Straub merely manipulates these ostensible characters to fall into a parallel existence, while giving the appearance of being an altered tale, they simply reinforce the assumptions of the reader. The stepmother is evil, and her actions are simply extended in time to reveal the full scope of her influence. Cinderella is the victim, and Straub makes it perfectly clear that her mental and emotional difficulties stem from her despotic childhood.

While Peter Straub presents somewhat plausible conditions, other writers in the horror genre have adopted a more fantastic approach to the interpretation of *Cinderella*. Tanith Lee, a well-respected writer, employs a much different analysis of the tale.

## Tanith Lee

Tanith Lee is a highly prolific writer who is considered "one of the most versatile and original writers of fantasy, horror, and science fiction" (Bleiler 1053). She writes a supernatural version of the Cinderella tale in her short story entitled "When the Clock Strikes". This short story fits a pattern of many other of Lee's writings in that her characters are a fraction off center from reality; at the same time, they are quite identifiable. Many of Lee's tales possess characters contending, either willingly or unwillingly, with paranormal abilities.

In "When the Clock Strikes", Tanith Lee presents characters that are contradictory to their parallel characters in past Cinderella tales. For example, in "When the Clock Strikes", it is the birth mother who takes on an evil and dark persona; also, Ashella, the Cinderella figure, is not the benevolent, innocent character of the past; instead in this tale she involves herself in black magic and sorcery. In the scope of stepmother characters, "When the Clock Strikes" is the only tale that does not arbitrarily villainize the stepmother. The sisters are equally established as kind and 'silly' characters who wish Ashella would join them in their interests.

Ashella, the Cinderella in the Tanith Lee tale, displays her 'coming of age' moment when she kills the Prince. She has waited and prepared her entire life to accomplish this task. Her mother swears her to the powers of Hell, and from that point on she prepares for the opportunity to complete her mother's vengeance. Through her mother's alliance with Satanas, she is able to reach that life altering moment.

Consistent with the historical supernatural manifestation of the natural mother, Ashella receives her power through her association with her mother and, indirectly, her mother's connection with the supernatural. Again we are presented with the natural mother/supernatural connection. This time, the manifestation or association with the natural mother is in the form of support from supernatural forces. She is not given the magical ribbon that Jane Yolen's Cinderella receives nor does she receive

assistance from animals inspired by the natural mother's spirit as in Angela Carter's tale. Instead she is given the power of 'black magic' through her natural mother's alliance with Satanas, obviously a reference to Satan. She even makes her daughter swear "to the fellowship of Hell." In contrast with natural mothers of other Cinderella tales, the natural mother expresses no overt desire to nurture Ashella as much as she uses her as a vehicle for vengeance. Certainly this character development is in stark contrast with the reinforced 'natural mother' stereotypes of the past.

The father is referred to as a silk merchant. He is spoken of in rather neutral terms as a man who seems to be appropriately concerned for his daughter and is not the type of man who cares to live alone. Therefore he remarries with the hope that his new wife and her daughters will be able to help his misdirected daughter.

The stepmother of the Tanith Lee tale is the most distinctive of all the stepmothers to be discussed in this paper. She is described as a 'harmless widow.' The father refers to her as the 'epitome of generosity and kindness.' As the other characters in the Lee tale, this portrayal contrasts with the expectations of a reader of the Cinderella tale. From the beginning of the tale, the reader must either vanquish stereotypes and preconceptions of the tale or embrace the twist that the horror genre provides the tale.

The peculiar narrator speaks to the reader directly, telling him or her that while the reader waits for a carriage, she will tell of the wonderful happenings that occurred in the very ballroom they are standing in. In this way, Lee quickly pulls the reader into the action of the story line. The narrator, who remains nameless throughout the tale, begins by pointing out a clock in the hall that was said to represent death. Each hour marks a different phase of life, until finally at midnight the hands of the clock approach death. She goes on to tell of a mother who uses black magic to reap vengeance upon the royalty of the land. The plot is laid out:

> It was rumored that the duke had obtained both his title and the city treacherously. Rumor declared that he had systematically destroyed those who had stood in line before him, the members of the princely house that formerly ruled here. He had accomplished the task slyly, hiring assassins talented with poisons and daggers. But rumor also declared that the duke had not been sufficiently thorough. For though he had meant to rid himself of all that rival house, a single descendant remained, so obscure he had not traced her—for it was a woman. (759)

Lee goes on to develop the character of this woman, making her strong and assertive in her revenge: "And she was a woman. Royal and proud she was, and seething with bitter spite and a hunger for vengeance, and as bloody as the duke, had he known it, in her own way" (759). Clearly, this

natural mother is quite different from the mothers presented in past Cinderella tales. However, both women, the stereotypical and the one found in the Lee story, are said to have supernatural powers. The powers displayed by the stepmother in neither the Perrault nor Grimm versions are as pivotal to the plot as the dark powers possessed by the Lee character. Lee continues, "In fact, she had sworn allegiance to Satanas. In the dead of night she would say portions of the Black Mass, offer sacrifice, and thereafter practice witchcraft against the duke" (759). She employed the efforts of her daughter in her murderous plot. One evening while she is practicing her magic, her unwitting husband happens to see what is occurring, "At an angle of the stair, the lighted room above, he paused to spy and listen. He had something of a shock when he heard his wife's voice rise up.... But what came next drained the blood from his heart. He crept away and went to his cellar for wine to stay himself. After the third glass he ran for neighbors and for the watch" (760). It is at the point of being discovered that the evil mother realizes that she must take immediate and drastic action:

> The woman and her daughter heard the shouts below and saw the torches in the garden. It was no use dissembling. The tower was littered with evidence of vile deeds, besides what the woman kept in a chest beneath her unknowing husband's bed. She understood it was all up with her, and she understood, too, how

witchcraft was punished hereabouts. She snatched a knife from the altar.

The girl shrieked when she realized what her mother was at. The woman caught the girl by her red hair and shook her.

"Listen to me, my daughter," she cried, "and listen carefully, for the minutes are short. If you do as I tell you, you can escape their wrath and only I need die. And if you live I am satisfied, for you can carry on my labor after me. My vengeance I shall leave you, and my witchcraft to exact it by. Indeed, I promise you stronger powers than mine. I will beg my lord Satanas for it, and he will not deny me, for he is just, in his fashion, and I have served him well. Now will you attend?"

"I will," said the girl.

So the woman advised her, and swore her to the fellowship of Hell. And then the woman forced the knife into her own heart and dropped dead on the floor of the tower. (760-1)

When the townspeople burst into the room, the young girl pretends to have been 'bewitched' by her mother. She then goes into a state of pretend vexation, covering herself in ashes and feigning remorse over any deeds her mother may have influenced her to commit. Secretly, however, she continues in her mother's work:

> "Oh, my father," she said, "never think I regret my wretched mother. It is my own unwitting sin I mourn." And she grasped his hand and spilled her tears on it. "I would rather live in a convent," she said, "than mingle with proper folk. And I would seek a convent too, if it were not that I cannot bear to be parted from you."
>
> Do you suppose she smiled secretly as she said this? One might suppose it. Presently she donned a robe of sackcloth and poured ashes over her red-copper hair. "It is my penance," she said, "I am glad to atone for my sins" (762).

As the mother and Cinderella characters are diametric opposites of those found in the standard Cinderella tale, the stepmother also follows this pattern. She enters the plot in the usual way:

> At the end of the second year, the silk merchant married again. It was inevitable, for he was not a man who liked to live alone.
>
> On this occasion, his choice was a harmless widow. She already had two daughters, pretty in an unremarkable style. Perhaps the merchant hoped they would comfort him for what had gone before, this normal cheery wife and the two sweet, rather silly daughters, whose chief interests were clothes and weddings. Perhaps he hoped also that his deranged daughter might be drawn out by company.

The father's hopes of socially integrating his daughter into an acceptable lifestyle foundered. The sisters tried diligently to include her and engage her in conversation. No matter how hard they tried to interest her in the normal topics of a young woman, make-up, hair and such, she would have no part of it. Occasionally, the girls ventured to join her as she was determined to live a life of "penance and humility." The stepmother became impatient:

> "Can you do nothing with the girl?" she demanded of her husband. "People will say that I and my daughters are responsible for her condition and that I ill-treat the maid from jealousy of her dead mother."
>
> "Now how could anyone say that," protested the merchant, "when you are famous as the epitome of generosity and kindness?" (762-3)

In four simple paragraphs, the stepmother is presented, her protests acknowledged and her existence as a character swept under a literary rug. In this parallel universe where the good characters are bad and the bad ones good, in making the stepmother virtuous, Lee also takes away any power she had previously in her stereotypical role. She is left a powerless, impotent woman whose main concern is not about the welfare of her stepdaughter; rather she is afraid people may think harshly of her.

Ashella, the Cinderella character, goes on to prepare for a ball that is being held in honor of the new prince. However, she and her stepsisters prepare in different ways. The sisters wear gowns of the finest silk, but Ashella's gown comes from a different source. In a magical, mystical way, the girl finally bathes herself of the ashes that had been on her body and hair for years. She arrives at the banquet and, instantly, the prince is taken with her.

As the prince becomes more and more enamoured with Ashella, he suddenly realizes who she is but becomes 'bound' to her despite her past:

> "…. What are you saying?" For the girl was speaking low beside him, and he could not catch her words.
>
> "I am saying a spell to bind you to me," she said.
>
> "But I am already bound."
>
> "Be bound, then. Never go free." (768)

He asks her to marry him but she replies, "Justice requires a harsher payment." At this moment the nefarious clock begins to strike, "And then, in the ballroom, Death struck the first note on the golden bell (768)." She then proclaims a series of curses on the man in memory and honor of her mother, herself, and her "Master, who rules the world" (768). The climax of the tale continues:

> As the fifth, sixth, the seventh strokes pealed out, the prince stood nonplussed. At the eighth and the ninth strokes, the strength

> of the malediction seemed to curdle his blood. He shivered and his brain writhed. At the tenth stroke, he saw a change in the loveliness before him. She grew thinner, taller. At the eleventh stroke, he beheld a thing in a ragged black cowl and robe. It grinned at him. It was all a grin below a triangle of sockets of nose and eyes. At the twelfth stroke, the prince saw Death and knew him.
>
> The conjuration of Death vanished from the terrace.
>
> Only one thing was left behind. A woman's shoe. A shoe no woman could ever have danced in. It was made of glass. (768-9)

Unlike the traditional Cinderella tale, here the prince quickly loses his mind. He decides he wants everyone to try on the peculiar glass slipper. The slipper, however, is 'sorcerous' and constantly changes itself, "its shape, its size, in order that no foot, save one, could ever be got into it." The deranged prince dies while he is running through the city with the slipper in his hand. The slipper shatters into a 'thousand fragments.' The narrator then makes a slight implication that she herself is death, and suddenly the carriage has arrived, and the tale is over.

Tanith Lee presents a bizarre twist on the traditional *Cinderella* motifs. At first glance, the stepmother presented appears to possess characteristics that the traditional wicked stepmother does not. She is kind, concerned, and has two daughters that seem to care for Ashella.

Upon deeper examination, however, she is also weak and virtually nonexistent. In fact, in Lee's parallel universe, all characters are the direct antithesis of their traditional characters. The good, natural mother is the evil sorceress in Lee's tale. The evil stepsisters are eager to befriend their new stepsister. Considering this, using Lee's tale as support for the argument that stepmothers are indeed evolving into virtuous characters would be a fallacy.

The stepmother is perhaps given minor virtuous traits; however, her power and influence are taken away. Good stepmothers have much less persuasive ability than evil stepmothers. Goodness is viewed as a passive characteristic, while "wickedness" or evil are given assertive qualities. Again and unfortunately, goodness, virtue and power are presented as irreconcilable traits.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary fairy tales have not been particularly kind to the stepmother character. As always, the question must be raised: What role does the stepmother play in the ubiquitous 'coming of age' theme found in all versions of the Cinderella tale? Do fairy tales today reflect the society within which they are written as they have in the past? And, finally, whether they do or do not reflect society, what type of impact do these tales have on the socialization of the woman in the stepmother role?

In order to come to some cohesive interpretation of the material presented, two aspects of the fairy tales must be examined. First, the motives for the stepmother's actions within the tale must be analyzed; and, second, the expectations for the stepmother character on the part of both the characters in the story and the reader or society at large begs to be examined. Among the greatest challenges in this analysis is maintaining distinction between the fairy tale stepmother and the flesh and blood person she parallels. In the tales, for certain, there is no denying who she is; although for the sake of variety she may be called 'witch' or 'ogress', she remains indisputably the stepmother—the second

wife of the father and the woman functioning in the position of the natural mother.

**Motives and Expectations**

The motives of the 'wicked stepmother' are rather transparent. She is jealous and vindictive. Not only is she jealous of her new daughter, she is jealous of being the second wife or second 'choice', if you will. However, we are compelled to ask whether she is mean because she is a stepmother or is she a stepmother because she is mean? Although this question seems to present a "chicken or egg" implication, there is a traceable pattern set forth for the character.

For example, in Perrault's version of *Cinderella,* the stepmother is given evil traits as a woman—separate from her mother role. The father marries a woman who *happens* to be evil. Perrault's *Cinderella* opens, "Once upon a time there was a worthy man who married for his second wife the haughtiest proudest woman that had ever been seen." In later tellings, the shift is toward the evil being inherent in the role of stepmother. In other words, it does not matter who the father has married—she is evil because she is a stepmother. This later rendition of the stepmother character is the one subscribed to by the Grimms'. In the Grimms' version of *Cinderella* they tell, "the rich man had a second wife, who brought along her two daughters." This second wife is no ordinary

woman—she is a *stepmother* and her evils will generate from her position, not her personality.

Clearly, Perrault felt it germane to present the woman as a wicked person outside of her role as stepmother; the Grimms, on the other hand, presuppose that the evil is inherent in the role of stepmother. This fact is highly volatile considering fairy tales are to be reflective of society. This indicates a grave inconsistency in the portrayal of the stepmother. The role of the stepmother is not necessarily attacked by Perrault, in fact, Perrault was well known for maintaining a higher literary social consciousness, a "modern approach," if you will. Of the many classical tales Perrault penned, all "were based on oral and literary motifs that had become popular in France, but Perrault transformed the stories to address social and political issues as well as the manners and mores of the upper classes" (Barchilion, et al 380). Perrault directly intended to reflect society, and in his interpretation of the stepmother, albeit while not a very nice person, is not evil simply because she is a stepmother.

The Grimms, however, present a very different woman in the role of Cinderella's stepmother. This stepmother is sly and cunning and feigns kindness until she has married. The Brothers Grimm choose not to reflect society and instead write a tale that presents a stepmother formula that feeds more deeply into the stereotypes expected by the social subconscious.

This assumption is precisely the insidious mechanism that finds real stepmothers fighting the stereotype today. This character translates down to the fairy tale literature to our day.

A quick review of the stepmothers found in this analysis reveals:

***Yolen***: It was a disastrous choice, for no sooner were they wed when it was apparent the woman was mean in spirit and meaner in tongue.

***Carter***: After her mother died and was buried, her father forgot the mother and forgot the child and married the woman who used to rake the ashes and that was why the child lived in the unraked ashes and there was nobody to brush her hair so it stuck out like a mat nor to wipe the dirt off her scabbed face and she had no heart to do it for herself....

***Straub***: I am thinking of Zena and the time she told me that weeping on my mother's grave wouldn't make a glorious wonderful tree grow there, it would just drown my mother in mud.

***Lee***: On this occasion, his choice was a harmless widow.

So our pattern for the sake of this argument is: cruel, cruel, cruel, and last but not least, kind but powerless. It is notable that none of these stepmothers actively embrace the role of a mother. In fact, Jane Yolen and Peter Straub each use stepmother characters that openly lack nurturing qualities and are resentful of the natural mother. They make hurtful

statements and directly attempt to undermine the memory of the natural mother; for Jane Yolen's character, this is by trying to take the ribbon from Sylva, or in Straub's telling, by refusing the child an opportunity to grieve. It is quite notable that Yolen's stepmother most reflects that of the Grimms'. Angela Carter and Tanith Lee each present a stepmother with unusual characteristics. Carter, for example, implies a stepmother who is an adulteress, an unusual twist to the character but not entirely unreflective of the hateful woman portrayed in Perrault's version of the tale. Tanith Lee presents an additional twist in that her stepmother is barely mentioned and is seen as an impotent character in the plot. While these are certainly variations on the character, they fall short of positive progress at discharging the myth and stereotype of the 'wicked stepmother'.

One may think, "But Tanith Lee *did* present a kind and caring stepmother." But take a second look, the Tanith Lee tale reveals a stepmother who, while some manifestations of decency are revealed, lacks the power that the other stepmothers in this analysis exhibit. In this tale, the power or influence is vested in the natural mother, and *she* is portrayed as the evil character. Lee's stepmother is depicted as an ineffective, shallow woman who is merely concerned with how her reputation will be affected by her stepdaughter's behavior. A pattern is

established, then, in each of the tales, that goodness and power are somehow irreconcilable concepts.

As students of fairy tales, did we really expect something different? Well, yes. Presumably, tales written today would maintain an approach that is more reflective of society particularly in the analysis of female characters considering the societal efforts that have been made toward equity for woman and women's roles. Is this too much to ask?

## Society Today

Few would disagree that stepmothers are a central part of many families today. Not only has the *Cinderella* tale entertained audiences for hundreds of years but it has also influenced the concepts of the motifs found in the material world. Hence, today rarely is a stepmother just a stepmother; thanks to the influence of the *Cinderella* tale, she is often referred to as the 'wicked stepmother' regardless of her actual character traits. While the death of the birth mother necessitated a stepmother's role in the family long ago, "divorce, rather than the death of a spouse, is now the most common precursor to remarriage..."(Ganong 71). It has also been said that no other role in the modern family carries the depth of negative stigmatism as that of stepmother. "Tales of the wicked stepmother permeate every culture and from early childhood pervade our consciousness" (Hughes 53). Few also would argue that the

generalization of the stepmother character as being always 'wicked and evil' is an overstatement. Where, then, does this presumption come from?

The renowned child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim answers the question in this way. The stepmother, rather than being a separate character from the mother, serves as an alter ego of the natural mother. This allows anger for the mother figure without the child's placing it directly on the mother. Bettelheim would argue that this is merely a split in the personality of the mother, "...although Mother is most often the all-giving protector, she can change into the cruel stepmother if she is so evil as to deny the youngster something he wants" (67). He continues:

> So the typical fairy-tale splitting of the mother into a good (usually dead) mother and an evil stepmother serves the child well. It is not only a means of preserving an internal all-good mother when the real mother is not all good, but it also permits anger at this bad "stepmother" without endangering the goodwill for the true mother, who is viewed as a different person. (67)

Bettelheim asserts that redirecting negative emotions onto the stepmother component of the mother "serves the child well." However, he fails to address the psychological ramifications of projecting presumed negativity upon an actual stepmother, who may very well be living in the home. Granted, I am not a psychologist; however, reason would dictate that indeed the child may *not* be well served by invariably seeing herself as a

potential victim of the 'wicked stepmother' archetype. If a child lives in a traditional two-parent home this interpretation of the mother split may be applicable. However, a child with a stepmother would never perceive two variations of the natural mother's personality; instead, she will project the positive to the natural mother and negative to the stepmother. Thus, a child waits for the stepmother to live up to the 'evil' and 'wicked' expectations that fairy tales have prepared. Any and all actions taken by the stepmother will be evaluated, even subconsciously, by the child to verify that the stepmother is indeed living up to her stereotype. The inconsistencies in Bettelheim's theory continue.

Bettelheim continuously calls the stepmother a 'fantasy' character, as if she were no different from the talking wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* or even the wicked witch from *Hansel and Gretel.* Bettelheim's theory is flawed by gaps in reasoning. Most certainly, the stepmother is a functioning member of society. Thus, Bettelheim takes monumental license with his interpretation of the character.

Bettelheim's theory, while well respected, does not take into consideration that tangible stepmothers exist and must forge an identity in society. Despite blemishes placed on her role by ubiquitous tales to which all of us are exposed, she must establish a relationship within the family and in society. Hence, children do not identify the wickedness with a split in the mother's personality. Since they are quite likely to have a real

stepmother, they place the wicked character interpretations on the actual stepmother. Not only do children fall into the trap of stereotyping the role, stepmothers themselves are victim to it. Research reveals:

> Unfortunately this well-known stereotype may interfere with appropriate socialization; that is, although a large percentage of American women "grow up" to be stepmothers, socialization for this role is not a part of the culture. Little girls may play with dolls of differing ethnic and racial background, dolls that come complete with adoption papers, and dolls of differing genders, but they do not play with stepchild dolls. And although little girls commonly say, "When I grow up I want to be a mommy," we never heard of a child saying, "I want to be a stepmommy when I grow up." (Ganong 77)

Bettelheim asserts that it is healthy for a child to deflect anger away from the natural mother, but makes no apologies for simply transferring it onto the stepmother. To add insult to injury, Bettelheim never truly addresses the existence of real stepmothers. Unfortunately, the stain of this stereotype is often not managed well by many stepmothers.

Christina Hughes simplifies the matter: "the ideology of motherhood and the ascription of a myth of wickedness form a disjunction which has to be negotiated by a stepmother" (71). Often this negotiation is at best troublesome. "Stepmothers perceive that the public

world of friends, relatives and even strangers will err towards a harsh view of their motives, thought and actions" (Hughes 64). With this perception in place in the stepmother's mind, actions are consciously and subconsciously taken to counterbalance the myth. "The need to assure their families that they are indeed not wicked means that a stepmothers behaviour must be beyond reproach" (Hughes 60). Add to this that stepmothers will inevitably feel occasional natural twinges of resentment; they may not vociferously argue against the stereotype as some sort of silent penance. Therefore, writers feel justified in exploiting the stepmother's guilt and insecurity inherent in the role.

Being unprepared for the role, few stepmothers feel confident enough to speak against the centuries old stereotype for fear some weakness in their position is betrayed. Thus, the cycle continues. Writers attack the role because it has worked for hundreds of years and there is little argument by stepmothers against the practice. Actual stepmothers are forced to wedge a respectable place in society in the shadow of the fairy tale stereotype. At the occurrence of meeting a stranger, a woman, upon revealing she is a stepmother, feels an unrelenting urge to belt out, "But I'm not wicked!" Author Sheldon Cashdan feels the whole concept should be kept in greater perspective. Not a stepmother himself, he writes:

> Modern critics claim that negative portrayal of the stepmother is part of a misogynistic streak in fairy tales. There is a grain of truth to the notion that fairy tales often depict some women as cruel and malicious, but there is danger in attributing too much significance to this notion since it implies that fairy tales are faithful representations of reality; they are not. (18)

While he is correct in asserting that fairy tales are not a representation of reality, they are, however, presented as a form of greater truth. Young people are taught to be diligent in their work ethic and generous and good. Also, they are given a peek into where their hardships and conflict in life may come from, for the *Cinderella* reading audience—it is the stepmother. Cashdan acknowledges, "People take these stories very seriously and apply them to their lives" (19). Additionally he adds, "Beneath the surface of these fanciful excursions into fantasy are real-life dramas that mirror real-life struggles" (17). Unfortunately, Cashdan contradicts himself and therefore invalidates his own argument.

In light of this research, the concept of fairy tales mirroring society must be revisited. By mere fact that stepmothers must 'live down', not live up to, the stereotype imposed upon them, it is evident that there is a gap between the perception of the stepmother of fairy tales and the reality of the stepmother of society. As presented, it is argued that fairy tales, even ones written for adults within the last twenty-five years, are not

necessarily reflective of the culture within which they are written. Good stepmothers exist; yet, they are rarely, if ever, given representation in modern fairy tale literature.

Will this trend continue? Probably. Based upon tradition and the lack of voice expressed in opposition to the stereotype, the stepmother, unfortunately, will remain an easy target for fairy tale writers. Unless a harmonious effort surfaces to dispel the myth, literary stepmothers will inevitably be a target, and real stepmothers will pay the price.

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