

The
Fairy Tale
Project

Exploring Women's
Independence

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Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time....

With these few words we're transported to a different realm, filled with magic and wonder and untold possibilities for delight. As little children we were enchanted by the adventures of beautiful princesses surrounded by fairy godmothers, wicked old witches, nasty stepmothers, and evil queens. We carry these and the dreams of handsome princes and happily-ever-afters into our worlds as adults.

Few of us live fairy tale lives, however, and the magical promises which these fairy tales convey come to be seen in a different light.

Thus we invite you to step into the enchanted world of fairy tales along a different, perhaps secret and hidden pathway, to explore the possibilities for rethinking and rewriting the classic fairy tales of our childhoods.

Perhaps through our own tales we can create a map for our own exciting journeys toward healthy independence, and create treasure maps for all the precious little princesses we know, living in their own magical land of "Once upon a time."

**The Calgary John Howard Society Literacy Program
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Introduction

It has been demonstrated by psychologists and educators time and again that stories and fairy tales do influence the manner in which children conceive the world and their places in it even before they begin to read.
(Zipes, p. xii)

Young girls growing up with fairy tales such as *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, whether in older classic versions or those created by Disney, form certain visions of how their lives are going to, or should, be. The realities of being a woman in today's society are seldom fairy tale quality, however, and in most instances can prove to offer significant challenges.

Through the reading of fairy tales old and new, and through rewriting fairy tales or writing our own, we can explore the messages we have received and who is giving us these messages, and we can create new stories to help us grow toward independence and a life based on our own, thoughtful choices.

Suggested Fairy Tales

Classic Fairy Tales

- Cinderella
- Sleeping Beauty
- Goldilocks and the Three Bears
- The Frog Prince
- Rumpelstiltskin
- Rapunzel
- Beauty and the Beast
- Bluebeard
- Little Red Cap
- Little Red Riding Hood

Modern Fairy Tales

- *The Donkey Prince* (1970) by Angela Carter
- *The Paper Bag Princess* (1982) by Robert Munsch
- *Princess Hynchatti and Some Other Surprises* (1973) by Tanith Lee
- *The Forest Princess* (1974) by Harriet Herman
- *The Return of the Forest Princess* (1975) by Harriet Herman
- *The Girl Who Cried Flowers* (1974) by Jane Yolen
- *The Hundredth Dove* (1977) by Jane Yolen
- *Dream Weaver* (1979) by Jane Yolen
- *Sleeping Ugly* (1981) by Jane Yolen
- *The Clever Princess* (1977) by Ann Tompert
- *All the King's Horses* (1976) by Michael Foreman
- *Little Red Riding Hood* (1978) by the Merseyside Fairy Tale Collective
- *Snow White* (1978) by the Merseyside Fairy Tale Collective
- *Kittatinny* (1978) by Joanna Russ
- *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales* (1980) edited by Alison Lurie
- *The Skull in the Snow and Other Folk Tales* by Toni McCarty
- *Stories for Free Children* (1982) edited by Letty Cottin Pogrebin
- *Transformations* (1971) by Anne Sexton
- *The Green Woman* (1973) by Meghan Collins
- *In the Suicide Mountains* (1977) by John Gardner

- *Beginning with O* (1977) by Olga Broumas
- *Beauty* (1978) by Robin McKinley
- *The Door in the Hedge* (1981) by Robin McKinley
- *The Bloody Chamber* (1970) by Angela Carter
- *Clever Polly and the Stupid Wolf* (1955) by Catherine Storr

Activity One

There are many ways in which we can be independent. We can be:

- financially independent
- emotionally independent
- physically independent
- intellectually independent

When we are **financially independent**, we can support ourselves and our children by ourselves, if we have to.

When we are **emotionally independent** we know that we are responsible for our own happiness, our attitudes, our feelings, the state of our relationships, and our success in the world.

When we are **physically independent** we know we have a choice in how we feel about our bodies and who has access to our bodies.

When we are **intellectually independent** we do our own thinking and problem-solving; we do not let others do our thinking for us, or make our important choices and decisions for us.

Think about, discuss and/or write about the ways you are independent in these four areas.

Activity Two

We constantly receive messages which try to tell us how we should be. Often these messages greatly restrict us in many ways. The following lists of characteristics are used to define females and males.

Typical Female and Male Characteristics

Independent	_____	Dependent
Self-reliant	_____	Subserviant
Aggressive	_____	Submissive
Assertive	_____	Yielding
Stoic	_____	Emotional
Risk Taker	_____	Cautious
Competitive	_____	Cooperative
Leader	_____	Supporter
Strong	_____	Gentle
Decisive	_____	Indecisive
Forceful	_____	Soft-spoken
Individualistic	_____	Conformist
Analytical	_____	Intuitive

(Adapted from Bingham and Striker)

1. Put a **checkmark** on the line to indicate where you think you are now.
2. Put an **L** at the place you would like to be.
3. Using these characteristics, discuss where the Princesses in popular, well-known fairy tales would be.

Activity Three

In many of the classic fairy tales, the authors portray some of the girls and women as being very dependent on others.

Read a version of *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*.

Write about ways in which Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty are dependent on others.

Journal: Explore through writing ways they could act more independently.

There are hundreds of versions of Cinderella, and in showing how different artists present the tale, new insights might be uncovered. For example, read a Chinese version, Korean version, and Egyptian version, which may make an exciting contrast to Disney.

Activity Four

Read a classic version of *Cinderella* or *Beauty and the Beast*.

View animated versions of these fairy tales.

Journal: Discuss and write in your journal about how the messages have changed from the classic version to the animated version, and what messages remain the same.

From "Sleeping Beauty in the Wood"

An old countryman spoke to the Prince in this manner:

"May it please your Royal Highness, it is now above fifty years since I heard my father say, who heard my grandfather say, that there then was in this castle a Princess, the most beautiful that ever was seen, that she must sleep there an hundred years, and should be waked by a King's son, for whom she was reserved.

The young Prince was all on fire at these words; and believing, without weighing the matter, that he could put an end to this fine adventure, and pushed on by love and honour, resolved that moment to look into it.

....

At last he came into a chamber all gilt with gold, where he saw upon a bed, the curtains of which were all open, the finest sight that was ever seen, a Princess, that appeared to be about fifteen or sixteen years of age, and whose bright resplendent beauty had somewhat in it luminous and divine."

Activity Five

Read classic versions of fairy tales such as **Sleeping Beauty**, **Rapunzel**, and **The Frog Prince**.

Identify and discuss with your learning group, your tutor, or write in your **Journal** about:

- The most valuable things about being a Princess.
- the qualities a princess has, or that are most desirable in a Princess.
- the most valued traits of a woman in this culture at this time, and where such messages come from.

Activity Six

Fairy tales have changed as they have been passed down to us over the centuries. Many fairy tales have been retold very differently, especially by the Disney Corporation.

Choose a classic and modern version of a fairy tale, such as *Sleeping Beauty*. Read the modern version first.

Discuss and/or write about how the story has changed, and possible reasons why.

In one classic version of *Sleeping Beauty*, she received the following gifts from the fairies:

- that she should be the most beautiful person in the world
- that she should have the wit of an angel
- that she should have an admirable grace in everything she did
- that she should sing like a nightingale
- that she should dance perfectly well
- that she should play all kinds of music to the utmost perfection

In a modern version of *Sleeping Beauty*, called *Sleeping Person of Better-Than-Average Attractiveness*, the fairies offer something different:

Sleeping Person of Better-Than-Average Attractiveness

Blessings

- blessed with a body image with which she is comfortable
- have a keen analytical mind that also leaves room for intuition and inspiration
- good math skills

The Curse

"May you grow up thinking you can't be complete without a man, put unrealistic hopes of perfect and total happiness on your marriage, and become a bored, dissatisfied, and unfulfilled housewife."

Activity Seven

Choose the fairy tale that made the strongest impact on you as a child, or your favourite fairy tale.

- What do you most enjoy about this fairy tale?
- Is there a part of this fairy tale that you wish were real?

Obtain a copy of this fairy tale and reread it.

What messages does it give regarding independence?

Activity Eight

When Diana and Prince Charles of England were married, the media dubbed this a "fairy tale wedding." What do journalists and others mean when they speak of "fairy tale weddings?"

- Write a short tale about a fairy tale wedding.
- In your **Journal** write about why fairy tale weddings may not lead to people "living happily ever after."

Activity Nine

Read the fairy tale *Cinderella*.

- Search for and list the words used to describe Cinderella, her stepmother and her stepsisters.

For example:

Cinderella	Stepmother/Stepsisters
Beautiful	Ugly

The writer of this fairy tale is giving readers a very clear message about how girls and women should be if they are to be lovable and acceptable.

- According to the fairy tale, what messages are girls and women given?
- Where else do similar messages come from?
- Who has the power and control over such messages?
- How can women exert their own power and control over the messages they live by?

Activity Ten

Read the modern fairy tale *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch.

Discuss with your tutor or class your reaction to this modern fairy tale. How is this fairy tale different from more classic fairy tales?

Activity Eleven

Choose one of your favourite fairy tales and write a different ending to it, an ending which will allow the Princess to find ways to be independent.

Activity Twelve

Judith Viorst wrote a poem about a perhaps more realistic response by Cinderella to the night of dancing.

**...And then the Prince Knelt
Down and Tried to Put the Glass
Slipper on Cinderella's Foot**

Judith Viorst

I really didn't notice that he had a funny nose.
And he certainly looked better all dressed up in fancy clothes.
He's not nearly as attractive as he seemed the other night.
So I think I'll just pretend that this glass slipper feels too tight.

- Why do you think Judith Viorst wrote this poem?
- What is Prince Charming supposed to look like and be like?
- Write a description of a modern-day Prince Charming.
- Choose one of your favourite fairy tales, and write a poem from the viewpoint of the princess.

"...intellectual independence: the willingness to think for myself and act by the judgment of my own mind. I learn from others, to be sure, but I do not grant to others authority over my consciousness or follow blindly where I do not understand or agree. I do not live secondhand."

(Branden, p. 40)

"There is no reason why women cannot live the lives they choose for themselves if they are willing to struggle and surmount obstacles which apparently hinder men, too, from realizing their identities."

(Robin McKinley cited in Zipes, p. 24)

"The measure of our intellectual independence (and maturity) is what it occurs to us to question.... Our independence and capacity for critical thought are most needed when the issues affect us directly in the daily conduct of our life."

(Branden, p. 61)

Activity Thirteen

Fairy tales often tell little girls what they should be like and how they should behave. For example, often "Princesses" need only be beautiful and patient as they await the arrival of Prince Charming. Once Prince Charming arrives, everything will be perfect, and they will live happily ever after. In reality, however, our lives often aren't fairy tale experiences.

In order to live happily and well in this life, young girls and women can do many things while waiting for their "Prince," keeping in mind he may or may not arrive, and if he does, he may not stay.

To grow toward financial independence, young women can:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

To grow toward emotional independence, young women can:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

To grow toward physical independence, young women can:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

To grow toward intellectual independence, young women can:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Activity Fourteen

Write a fairy tale showing how young girls can grow up to be independent and responsible for themselves.

Snow Drop

(from a version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*)

"And thus Snow-drop lay for a long time, and still only looked as though she were asleep; for she was even now as white as snow, and as red as blood, and as black as ebony.

At last a prince came and called at the dwarfs' house; and he saw Snow-drop, and read what was written in golden letters.

Then he offered the dwarfs money, and earnestly prayed them to let him take her away, but they said, "We will not part with her for all the gold in the world."

At last however they had pity on him, and gave him the coffin: but the moment he lifted it up to carry it home with him, the piece of apple fell from between her lips, and Snow-drop awoke, and said "Where am I?"

And the prince answered, "Thou art safe with me."

(Excerpt from Opie, p. 236)

Activity Fifteen

At the library seek out different versions of a fairy tale. The story may be told differently, or the illustrators may have created unique moods. Explore the messages these different versions suggest.

For example, there are two beautiful versions of *Snow White*:

- one illustrated by Nancy Buckert, which offers a very pristine view
- another illustrated by Trina Sharf Hyman, which suggests very sensual overtones to the tale.

Activity Sixteen

Get together with some friends or fellow students and watch a movie such as *Pretty Woman*, *Shirley Valentine*, or *Thelma and Louise*.

Discuss the messages about women presented in these movies, and the similarities to the older classic fairy tales. In what ways do these movies reinforce the messages of the classic fairy tales? Do they offer new ways in which women can be acceptable? What do these movies encourage women to be and to do?

Activity Seventeen

- List the valued characteristics of Princesses in fairy tales you have read recently.
- Examine current fashion magazines and list the valued characteristics for women that are offered there.
- List the valued characteristics of women portrayed in the movies.
- In what ways are the messages the same, and in what ways are they different?
- What happens to Princesses who look this way and those who do not?
- What are the potential risks, health and otherwise, for women who try to copy these models?

Valued Characteristics of Women in:

Fairy Tales	Fashion Magazines	Movies, T.V., Pop Stars	Modern Day "Princesses"

Activity Eighteen

In the fairy tale **Aschenputtel**, a version of the Cinderella story, the eldest stepsister cuts off her toe so her foot will fit into the shoe of gold. The other stepsister cuts off her heel.

- Discuss with your learning group, tutor, or write in your journal about the kinds of physically harmful things young women do to themselves to become acceptable to the Prince.

Activity Nineteen

Role play, or write and perform a play in which *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Rapunzel* and *Sleeping Beauty* get together for lunch.

- Based on the classic fairy tales, what would they talk about?
- What might they discuss today?

Activity Twenty

Many of the British and European fairy tales cast women as either beautiful, young and dependent, or as ugly, old, and actively involved in causing mischief or evil in the world. Tales from other lands can offer us a more enlightened view.

For example, in the wonderful Indian (Punjabi) tale, Four Girls and a King, the girl is chosen as a bride for the King for her wit and her confidence.

"She became his confidential advisor in all his affairs, public and private. And she grew in wisdom and her fame spread through many lands."

Read several tales from other cultures. Can you find some that might have been helpful for you when you were growing up?

Activity Twenty-One

Think about the women you know of who are wealthy.

- Who are they?
- How did they acquire their wealth?
- What are they being financially rewarded for?
- Was their wealth acquired easily, through hard work, by inheritance, through marrying well?
- In your **Journal**, write about what young women must do to be financially independent in our society today.

Activity Twenty-Two

Girls and young women are often denied access to information which would make their lives better. People in authority may keep them in ignorance of knowledge crucial to their well-being.

For example, Sleeping Beauty was kept in ignorance of the curse put upon her at birth. If someone had told her to stay away from spinning wheels, and why she should do that, her story would have been quite different.

- List types of important information which was withheld from you which had an impact on your "story."
- Rewrite *Sleeping Beauty*. Have someone in your story tell her about the spinning wheel problem. How will her story end differently?
- **Journal:** Write about someone telling you important information which had been withheld from you. How would that knowledge have changed your "story"?

Activity Twenty-Three

In the Cornish tale, *Betty Stoggs' Baby*, Betty looks constantly outside of herself for those things which will make her happy.

- Seventeen-year-old Betty realizes she's at an age where she'll be "needing a husband so's I can live happily ever after."
- Once she has her husband, however, she finds many other things she needs to make her happy - all of them external to herself which other people need to provide, i.e., a cottage, some company, a baby, but none of these is able to keep her happy for any length of time.
- Journal: In your journal write about what you need in order to be happy, and the actions you must take in order to meet your needs.

As the Indian guru once told a pupil who was in desperate search of contentment, 'I will give you the secret. If you want to be happy, BE HAPPY!'

Activity Twenty-Four

In a classic version of **Goldilocks and the Three Bears** (found in Opie), Goldilocks was an impudent, bad old woman, and all three bears were male. The "Little, Small, Wee bear" found upon his pillow "the little old Woman's ugly, dirty head."

At the end of the story we read:

Now the window was open, because the Bears, like good, tidy Bears, as they were, always opened their bed-chamber window when they got up in the morning. Out the little old Woman jumped; and whether she broke her neck in the fall; or ran into the wood and was lost there; or found her way out of the wood, and was taken up by the constable and sent to the House of Correction for a vagrant as she was, I cannot tell. But the Three Bears never saw anything more of her.

In recent versions of this tale, Goldilocks is a young girl.

- Why do you think Goldilocks has been transformed in this way?
- Why would a "Mother Bear" be included in popular versions?

Read several fairy tales and examine how older women are portrayed. What messages do young women receive from such portrayals?

Activity Twenty-Five

Stepmothers and stepsisters are often portrayed as evil in fairy tales.

Dead mothers and fairy godmothers are portrayed as good, as are beautiful princesses.

- Choose three or more fairy tales and examine the ways in which the females are portrayed.
- What messages are we being given?

Activity Twenty-Six

Often fairy tales portray women as being cruel to each other. Such cruelty seems to be on the increase in our society.

Rewrite a fairy tale, such as *Cinderella*, in which the young women help each other to achieve their goals.

Activity Twenty-Seven

The **Frog Prince** is a tale in which a handsome husband is won by a girl's acceptance of a creature that is at first repulsive to her (in Opie, p. 238).

What other fairy tales are similar in this way?

Journal: Explore in your journal writing what such an idea could possibly mean.

The Frog Prince

"Then the King's daughter began to weep, and was afraid of the cold frog, that nothing would satisfy him but he must sleep in her pretty clean bed. Now the King grew angry with her, saying, "That which thou has promised in thy time of necessity, must thou now perform." So she picked up the frog with her finger and thumb, carried him upstairs and put him in a corner, and when she had lain down to sleep, he came creeping up, saying, "I am tired and want sleep as much as you; take me up or I will tell your father." Then she felt beside herself with rage, and picking him up, she threw him with all her strength against the wall, crying, "Now will you be quiet, you horrid frog!" But as he fell, he ceased to be a frog, and became all at once a prince with beautiful, kind eyes. And it came to pass that, with her father's consent, they became bride and bridegroom."

Activity Twenty-Eight

- Write a letter to a little Princess that you know, with some helpful advice for her.

Activity Twenty-Nine

- Choose a fairy tale and create a younger sister for the "Princess."
- Write a fairy tale about this younger sister who makes different choices in her life and grows up happy, independent, and capable.

Activity Thirty

- Write a fairy tale (for a little Princess you know) about a little girl who grows up to be happy, independent, a great thinker and decision-maker, and successful in her chosen career.

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Fairy Tale Messages

- A woman's life story ends when she gets married.
- Good" girls live for or through others.
- Men are active, women are passive.
- Only evil women go after what they want.
- Women are not capable of solving their own problems without help from men or supernatural beings.
- Magic plays a major role in most women's lives.
- Men are often transformed by the love of a good woman.
- Women who venture too far from home generally get into trouble.
- Beauty is a woman's most important asset.
- Smart or active women are not beautiful.
- Women are most appealing when they are sleeping or dead.

(Bingham and Striker, p. 204)

Other Fairy Tale Messages

- Females are poor girls or beautiful princesses who will only be rewarded if they demonstrate passivity, obedience, and submissiveness.
- Stepmothers are always evil.
- The best woman is the housewife.
- Beauty is the highest value for women.
- Males should be aggressive and shrewd.
- Money and property are the most desirable goals in life.
- Magic and miracles are the means by which social problems are resolved.
- Fairy tales are implicitly racist because they often equate beauty and virtue with the colour white and ugliness with the colour black.

(Zipes, p. 6)