Fairy Tales and Gender Stereotypes

Samara Green, High school student from Pontiac, Maryland
Huffington Post Teen. February 14th, 2014.

In The Little Mermaid, who provides Ariel with a shelter and future life of luxury? Prince Eric. In Cinderella, who brings her out of rags and into riches? Prince Charming. In The Sleeping Beauty, who awakens Aurora from her wretched curse and saves the day? Prince Phillip. Seeing a common trend? Fairy tales are a child's world of imagination and pleasure, but they also provide a source of inspiration and role models. Do we really want to teach young children that women are weak and vulnerable and only succeed when a man intervenes? Especially now that our present society is shifting to be more tolerant of a diverse array of lifestyles. These fairy tales became part of popular culture when they were adapted to the silver screen during the 20th century, a time when many minorities were striving for equality. Surprisingly, even today, you can see similar themes. Take Twilight, for example -- a great example of a 21st century teenage girl-crazed phenomenon. Twilight represents the idea of a girl's dependency on strong, capable men. Bella, the main character, is a weak and clumsy human, which requires her vampire boyfriend Edward and werewolf friend Jacob to constantly come to her rescue.

Both men and women have a tendency to make assumptions that women belong in specific types of jobs. Psychologists have performed experiments and studies to support this concept. They had a mixed group of girls and boys, and asked them to write "female" or "male" to a list of job occupations and personality traits. Most of the secretary, assistant, or housework was categorized under "female" while lawyers, CEOs, and higher-up positions were designated to "males." Same held true when testing for personality traits. The dominant, loud traits were more likely to be considered masculine attributes while comforting, warm traits were viewed as feminine. This cultural belief that women are "soft" or "need support" or are in some other way inferior beings may be far less apparent than in earlier time periods, but the tendency to ascribe a gender bias to jobs or personality traits is still engrained in society.

In many cultures, women are expected to be subservient and only take on the job of bearing and taking care of children. Recently I read Nicolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn's book Half the Sky, about women who were beaten when trying to run away from abusive marriages or simply for not conceiving a baby boy. One woman was left in a hut on the edge of her African village because of she had a fistula that bothered her husband. She was left to fend off the coyotes and save her own life while still suffering from her fistula.

Rape is becoming more prevalent in today's world; it is being used as a weapon against villages and people. When a woman's main possession is her "purity," taking that away by force is an efficient way to make families seen as less honorable.

In today's age, we've made a lot of progress beyond the June Cleaver stereotype, but why does the fairy tale theme persist?

Maybe it is because of the books and movies we grow up learning from and the characters we idolize. A closer look at the themes and characters in children's pop culture might be just the thing to shift the tide. Some stories have given females characters more power and strength, like Mulan. But which story would you recognize first? Mulan or Cinderella? The stories that support the idea of capable women are often not the favored or popular ones. If women want to change the stereotype, then the tales of castles and princesses may need a little tweaking.