Scholars say fairy tales stress beauty
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Fairy tales offer children a fantasy world of magic, romance and adventure where pumpkins are transformed into crystal coaches and a kiss from a handsome prince can bring a young girl back to life. But tales like "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty" and "Snow White" are also sending strong messages about the importance of having a beautiful appearance, according to a study by Purdue University sociologist Liz Grauerholz and Lori Baker-Sperry, an assistant professor of women's studies at Western Illinois University.

Grauerholz and Baker-Sperry examined 168 Brothers Grimm fairy tales to study how they deal with beauty in "The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children's Fairy Tales." Beauty or ugliness is referred to in 94 percent of the Grimms' fairy tales, with evil characters often being described as ugly. In "Cinderella," beauty in women was referred to 114 times. The stories have fewer than 35 references to male characters, according to the study.

"I think the message that's given to girls is that beauty is one of the most important traits for females in our society," says Grauerholz. "Boys don't get the message as much that it's so important to be handsome." The Brothers Grimm fairy tales were written by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in the early 19th Century. Originally written in German, they were translated into English in 1851. Five have been reproduced more than 100 times: "Cinderella," "Snow White," "Briar Rose" (also known as "Sleeping Beauty"), "Little Red Cap" (also known as "Little Red Riding Hood") and "Hansel and Gretel."

The heroines are usually beautiful, and ugliness is seen as a sign of evil in 17 percent of the stories, according to the study. Many argue that beauty or ugliness is used a symbol of each character's capacity for good or evil. There are notable exceptions to this -- such as Snow White's beautiful, evil stepmother -- but ugly characters with kind hearts are hard to find.

"A lot of the response we've gotten has been: 'Oh come on. What's wrong with beauty?' " Baker-Sperry says. "Most people who have responded negatively or questioned this have not questioned the findings." Baker-Sperry says the lengths adolescent girls go to in seeking society's beauty ideal, such as developing eating disorders and seeking plastic surgery, are argument enough that the preoccupation with beauty can become dangerous. It affects boys as well in their view of women, Grauerholz says.

"In some ways, I think boys get the same message, which is what's important about girls is what they look like," she says.
Neither researcher advocates tossing fairy tales off children's reading lists, citing the lessons about human nature and the grand illustrations that usually accompany the classic tales. Both Grauerholz and Baker-Sperry read fairy tales to their children, but say they try to point out the stories' preoccupation with looks. "My daughter is really interested in fairy tales. She's 4. We'll talk about it, and I'll say, 'Just because in this story this ugly person is bad, do you think people who aren't attractive -- do you automatically think they're bad?' " Baker-Sperry says.

Grauerholz hopes the fairy tales will continue to evolve to include ordinary-looking or ugly characters as the heroines or heros, as in the 2001 animated film "Shrek," whose happy ending has a beautiful princess turning back into an ogre and leaving the prince at the altar.

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Ms Grauerholz and her co-author, Lori Baker-Sperry from Western Illinois University, analysed 168 fairy tales which had been written in the 1800s by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm commonly known as as the Brothers Grimm.

They then studied which ones had been reproduced the most in the 20th Century. The top five re-told tales were the stereotype-laden Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel.

Nearly all 94% of the 168 stories referred to physical appearance, with an average of 14 such references per story.

More often the tales referred to women’s beauty than to men.
One in five of the stories linked being ugly with being evil and in many stories ugly characters were punished as part of the plot.

The full findings of the study can be found in the journal Gender and Society.

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