

Research article

# Unexplained tales: Cinderella and Prince Cinders

## Cuentos no contados: Cenicienta y el Príncipe Cinders

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Storytelling is an age-old human practice, and contemporary children's literature has attempted to reverse old clichés by including alternative characters. However, studies indicate that children, even as young as 4 or 5 years old, show discomfort with gender role reversal. **Methodology:** This article critically analyses gender roles in children's literature through a comparative textual study between the classic version of Cinderella and its reinterpretation in Prince Cinders. The language and literary devices used in both versions are examined. **Results:** The analysis reveals a significant evolution in the treatment of the characters, aimed at promoting more inclusive and plural educational models. **Discussion:** The dominant presence of non-traditional roles in the new narratives is key to positively influencing children's perceptions of gender, although children's initial bewilderment is evidence of the persistence of socially entrenched stereotypes. **Conclusions:** Children's literature can be a transformative tool for challenging and redefining gender norms, and reinterpretations such as Prince Cinders are an important step towards a more egalitarian education from the earliest ages.

**Keywords:** children's literature; narrative structures; gender stereotypes; new masculinities; storytelling.

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## Resumen

**Introducción:** Contar historias es una práctica humana milenaria, y la literatura infantil contemporánea ha intentado revertir antiguos clichés mediante la inclusión de personajes alternativos. Sin embargo, estudios indican que los niños, incluso desde los 4 o 5 años, muestran desconcierto ante la inversión de roles de género. **Metodología:** Este artículo analiza críticamente los roles de género en la literatura infantil a través de un estudio textual comparativo entre la versión clásica de *Cenicienta* y su reinterpretación en *Prince Cinders*. Se examinan el lenguaje y los recursos literarios utilizados en ambas versiones. **Resultados:** El análisis revela una evolución significativa en el tratamiento de los personajes, orientada a promover modelos educativos más inclusivos y plurales. **Discusión:** La presencia dominante de roles no tradicionales en las nuevas narrativas resulta clave para influir positivamente en las percepciones infantiles sobre el género, aunque el desconcierto inicial de los niños evidencia la persistencia de estereotipos socialmente arraigados. **Conclusiones:** La literatura infantil puede ser una herramienta transformadora para cuestionar y redefinir las normas de género, y reinterpretaciones como *Prince Cinders* constituyen un paso importante hacia una educación más igualitaria desde las primeras edades.

**Palabras clave:** literatura infantil; estructuras narrativas; estereotipos de género; nuevas masculinidades; cuentos.

## 1. Introduction

Children's literature is said to play a pivotal role in shaping their cognitive, emotional, and social development. Fairy tales belong to that tradition of stories for the youngest and they are commonly defined as narrations that include the tribulations of a character, who undergoes a process of renewal or self-knowledge that has a happy ending (Teverson, 2013).

The origins of fairy tales are difficult to trace since they are part of an existing oral transmission that has been conveyed from generation to generation (Zipes, 2012). However, Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm are generally regarded as the initiators of the new literary genre (Meland, 2020) because they collected and compiled some of those traditional stories. Fairy tales were not originally created for children though, but for adults, and their purpose was to convey values, knowledge and experience that helped individuals learn about themselves and the world around them (Zipes, 2012).

The audience shift took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century when adaptations of those stories in a more child-friendly way, that minimized violence and sexuality, were created (Schenda, 2007).

Our digitalized world seems to have somehow marginalized the relevance of fairy tales as spaces for constructing acceptable ways of behaviour nowadays. Indeed, they are certainly not the only factors that impact gender construction in children (Parsons, 2004), but they still contribute to embedding values and qualities that may lead to appropriate conduct in social contexts (Gilbert, 1994).

One of the most frequently portrayed stereotypes in traditional tales is gender roles and it is widely believed that traditional masculinities still largely rule children's literature. For generations, children's books painted masculinity with a broad bush of fearless warriors (Alonso, 2016), who are usually presented in outdoor activities or in busy jobs.

Indeed, they are rarely at home and, if so, they hardly ever take care of children or do housework.

These stereotypes of strength and stoicism have often come together with emotional suppression that prevents male characters to express emotions or embrace vulnerability (Stephens, 2013). Research in children's development and perceptions (Freeman, 2007 or Miller, C. F., Lurye, L. E., Zosuls, K. M., & Ruble, D, 2009) indicate that the shaping of a gender role identity takes place at an early age, as young as three, and that perception impacts, or rather conditions, future social behaviour.

In this sense, social psychology affirms that gender stereotypes tend to appear in children to overstate the adherence of female and male individuals to certain values (Ellemers, 2018) while excluding others. As the Dutch psychologist claims, those misconceptions reinforce different expectations about males and females that set them apart, for instance, females need to be warm and family oriented whereas males should be more work-oriented and assertive.

There is abundant literature that underpins the importance of fairy tales to provide children with information about gender roles and expectations that dates to Bem (1981) and the "Gender Schema Theory". Her studies advocated for a more flexible approach to gender schemes to reverse biased constructions of gender-appropriate behaviours in children's literature.

Her contribution paved the way for many developments in the analysis of the impact of fairy tales on children's attitudes and perceptions of gender. Among others, Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) and England, Descartes, and Collier-Meek (2011) followed suit and indicated that traditional children's literature tended to portray male figures as main characters that lead the plot and females who take supportive roles or need to be rescued by that fearless and dashing male figure.

In the same vein, VisikoKnox-Johnson (2016) states that stories expose children to conflicts and relationships that are key to developing their morals and consciousness. Children's stories and their influence are alive, and it is important that we examine the messages embedded in them to stop perpetuating inaccurate or biased generalizations.

The idea of reversing traditional gender patterns in children's literature and presenting non-traditional ones to young learners is not new. Davies' study (2003) found out that, when presented with different constructions of gender that portrayed princesses as tough and assertive, children interpreted the representation as weird, particularly boys.

Davis (2003) suggested that their perceptions shed light on the rooted stereotypes that were part of the school hidden curriculum. Similarly, Paterson's article (2014) on role-playing in storytelling showed that boys had a greater problem accepting girls in a boy's part than girls did, and that view revealed the different mindsets that each gender builds. More recently, Martinez, Rodríguez and Virgós (2023) have examined the attitudes of very young children in relation to gender, following the track of Davies' studies.

The Spanish authors come to very interesting conclusions in terms of gender roles: they claim that as early as three years of age girls begin to include elements of the traditional gender order during the reading of stories. They also conclude, in line with Earles (2017), that children have very strong gender expectations that need to be acknowledged and revisited.

Finally, they advocate for new teaching practices that redefine the roles of the male and female in traditional stories at school, but they also insist on the need for bringing other key agents of socialization such as families along.

New children's literature, particularly in the past 20 years, has tried to reverse these clichés and has intended to depict alternative characters, who live their life unconventionally. Stories such as "King & King" by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland or "The Paper Bag Princess" by Robert Munsch have aimed at gender reversal, domesticity and emotional expression (Le Grange, 2015).

Nonetheless, research pinpoints that children even at the tender age of 4 or 5 appear to be "puzzled" when gender roles are reversed, particularly in story endings (Le Grange, 2015). It is therefore paramount to provide positive impacts on children through stories where non-traditional roles are present and dominant (Steyer, 2014).

### **1.1. A brief history of the "Cinderella" Tale**

Storytelling is a human process that has existed since the dawn of time. Tellers have told stories to a variety of audiences and each new retelling has often included new elements that were not in the original narrations. These modifications tend to be culturally specific (Greyling, 2014), but they are also based on the social and cultural circumstances of a certain period. Folklorists define these new versions as "variants" (McCallum, 2015) since they have their own meaning and contain unique features related to the place and time where the story is told.

The tale of Cinderella is one of the most well-known and enduring fairy tales in the world. Hughes (2016) states that the earliest known version of the Cinderella story is the Greek myth of Rhodopis, a beautiful slave who caught the eye of a wealthy king. One day, she lost one of her sandals while bathing in the river, and the king found it and fell in love with her. He searched for the owner of the sandal, and eventually found Rhodopis and married her.

The next version of the story that we know of is the Chinese folk tale Ye Xian, in which Ye Xian was a girl who was forced to work as a servant by her stepmother and stepsisters, but she met a prince at a party, and they fell in love. Finally, Ye Xian was able to escape from her stepmother and stepsisters and marry the prince. According to Basile (2007), the first printed "Cinderella" story appeared in Italy, in Giambattista's collection known as *Il Pentamerone*. However, this Cinderella was a strong-willed character who managed to get rid of her stepmother and succeeded in securing a better life for her and her family.

This more brutal story was followed by Charles Perrault's *Cendrillon ou la petite pantoufle de verre* (1697). In Perrault's version, Cinderella is a poor orphan who is treated badly by her stepmother and stepsisters. One day, she is invited to a ball by the prince, and with the help of her fairy godmother, she is able to go to the ball and win the prince's heart. The Grimms' version of Cinderella, published in 1812 under the title *Aschenputtel*, shares many similarities with Perrault's "Cendrillon", namely, the wealthy origin of Cinderella, the loss of her real mother at a very young age, or the mistreatment by her evil stepmother and sister in the foster home (Šarec Miškin, 2019).

Nonetheless, Grimms' adaptation presented remarkable differences: the story did not include a fairy godmother but helping birds that understood the heroine's suffering and, more importantly, it emphasized the moral of being submissive and obedient to men (prince), who becomes a sort of Cinderella's owner (Bottigheimer, 2016).

The most memorable version of Cinderella was produced by Walt Disney Animation Studio in the 1950s and it has paved the way for more recent adaptations.

Although based on Perrault's text. Disney's 1950 animated version added some innovations to the characters such as anthropomorphised animals, a powerful fairy godmother (Perrault just mentioned this character briefly), a dead father (very much alive in Perrault's) and a more accurate description of the evil stepmother and sister (they do not even have names in the French text) who endure hardships at the end of the story due to their wrong treatment to Cinderella.

## 2. Methodology

This piece of research wants to shed light into the analysis of narrative structures but also into the diversity of textual tools arising from the classical version of Cinderella by Charles Perrault and the modern new version called Prince Cinders by Babbette Cole. Certainly, the analysis of children's literature through both structural and textual lenses can offer a comprehensive understanding of the text's meaning and impact.

By and large, the structural analysis focuses on the underlying framework of the story, exploring elements such as the plot, the characters of the themes whereas the textual analysis delves into language and literary devices conveyed through the narrative. For the structural analysis, considering the theory of the activities that define the characters as established by Lavandier (2003), the capacity for structural analysis of Truby (2008) and the complete research of Macià (2014) on the structures of short films, we take as a basis the theory of narrative structures in children literature of Canals-Botines (2020).

The structures that are frequently read to children tend to resemble the classical Aristotelian structure. That is, a structure that is made up of three very different acts, each of which contains specific information so that the story unfolds in an orderly manner from beginning to end. The causal structure is Aristotle's classical, but it offers a turning point at the end that amplifies the suspense. The reader, the listener, is encouraged by an ending that is not such and enjoys the pleasure of an alternative ending.

This happens because the story is short and fast movement can do so without damaging the discursive text. The base chain of this structure is the following: CLARIFICATION+FIRST CRISIS+END+FINAL TURNING POINT.

Therefore, Cinderella follows the pattern of the Causal Structure as well as Prince Cinders. Nevertheless, these stories differ in many aspects. As it has been already mentioned, the causal structure is the classic Aristotle's structure, but it offers a turning point at the end which enlarges the suspense. The reader is encouraged by an ending which is not so and enjoys the pleasure of a second opportunity for that ending.

The story, in the case of children's storybooks, is short and the rapid movement can be done with no damage to the discursive text. The final turning point can be from positive to negative and from negative to positive. In Cinderella and Prince Cinders, the turning point goes from negative to positive. Still, the pretext for the plot, the protagonists, the supporting characters, the increasing suspense, the ending, and the final turning point differ completely from the classical version to the modern one.

In textual analysis, the characters are often male, and the female characters are few and far between. This does not mean that there cannot be male protagonists, but that there is a lack of balance between the number of male and female characters. The status of the characters in the story reflects society's stereotypes.

In this sense, the use of fantasy is key to breaking the textual heritage in the structure of the tale. Kohan (2003) describes the process of writing the story by appealing to the importance of fantasy, "The word fantasy comes from the Greek Phantasia, which means: Mental faculty to imagine non-existent things and process by which objects in the environment are reproduced with images". It is as important for building a ship as it is for writing a story, for both require planning in advance (p. 92).

Thus, the textual analysis will consider the title, the characters, the activities of the characters, their interventions in the dialogues and their attributes. Therefore, this piece of research intends to find common grounds of both classical and modern texts in terms of structure and textual analysis. To do so, the number of female and male characters in the story will be analysed to determine which the scale of feminine and masculine presence is and the impact of the characters' relevance in each of the versions.

In addition, the title, specificities of the characters, the activities of the characters, their interventions in the dialogues and their attributes will be analysed to identify which are the characters' patriarchal established roles in the two versions of the tale.

### 3. Results

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the term Cinderella means "someone or something that is given little attention or care, especially less than deserved". The title of the narrative is nominative and descriptive, and it provides us with important information about the story: the name of the protagonist and the characteristic that seems to define her the most.

Charles Perrault's Cinderella is a very beautiful and very sweet young girl, who when her beautiful and sweet mother and her father die -after her father married for the second time to her evil stepmother, she is deprived of the role of maid of her house that belonged to her second family, her evil stepmother and her two evil half-sisters.

Her evil stepmother and her two cruel and evil half-sisters impose on her the role of slave and domestic maid. Pawlowska (2021) adds that in the fairy tale "the main character competes for the favour of the prince with her sisters who are jealous of her beauty. She does not get any support from other women, on the contrary - the stepmother is also not on Cinderella's side" (p. 161).

In Charles Perrault's French version of Cinderella's tale, with the magical help of her protective fairy, Cinderella can attend the dance and wear a wonderful princess silk dress (despite opposition from her evil stepmother and two evil half-sisters who try to stop her from going).

At the prince's dance, Cinderella attracts the attention of the prince, with whom she dances all night. But, at midnight as she has agreed before, she needs to leave the dance and, when running away, loses one crystal shoe. This shoe is found by the prince who will seek her desperately in his realm.

At the end of the tale, the shoe will allow them to meet again by choosing whom it fits. Therefore, for Cinderella to be given attention by the prince, in Pawlowska's (2021) words "she must undergo a metamorphosis, which is a literal metamorphosis" (p. 160), meaning that the change will be totally in her physical appearance. This is already the announcement of a partial transformation of the main feminine character as the story unfolds.

The prince in the story is a powerful handsome, young masculine character. As Slany (2011) affirms “a trophy, a prize, the embodiment of the highest value instilled in women from childhood, which causes them to copy behaviours resulting from cultural oppression without thinking” (p. 277).

The fairy represents the will of Cinderella's mother and Cinderella's father, outraged by the cruelty of Cinderella's evil stepmother and by the unrespectful tone of Cinderella's two evil half-sisters. As for the activities of the characters, they are clear enough in the classic version of the tale. Cinderella accepts her fate and stays home without saying a word in the first dance. However, Prince Cinders does not seem to find his perfect match and therefore a second ball to meet her. After her running away, he organises the search of the princess to be until he finds Cinderella and fits her shoe.

In the case of *Prince Cinders*, the title of the narrative is also nominative and descriptive, it gives us important information about the story: the name of the protagonist and the characteristics that seem to define him the most. Cinders is understood as a diminutive of Cinderella, and it is turned into a masculine name.

Therefore, the meaning of Prince Cinders is a prince to be but also someone that is given little attention, especially less than deserved. The main character is Prince Cinders, whom the author refers to as someone who is not much of a prince: small, spotty, scruffy, skinny and squirt are the words used to describe Cinders. At the beginning of the narrative, he has a strong desire to be like his brothers and conform with societal pressures on masculinity.

After the failed enchantment, he appears as a monkey with a swimsuit. With regards to his personality, Prince Cinders is too shy, and he only has the feeling of being pretty good when the enchantment is done. She shows a passion for baking and housekeeping that subverts stereotypes about feminine activities as the text downplays traditional notions of physical prowess: his strengths reside in areas such as kindness and resourcefulness. Incidentally, there is an image of Prince Cinders comparing his body to a magazine's body builder in the storybook.

In *Prince Cinders*, most characters which are relevant for the structure development are male characters. Cinder is contrasted with his stereotypical, sports-loving brothers, who highlight the limitations of traditional masculinity and this fact offers viewers alternative models of manhood. Prince Cinders' two elder brothers are described as big and hairy, and in the images, they are dark-haired, with hard facial features and both with moustache. They also show their chest's hair with the shirt slightly opened.

Their role in the story is bothering their little brother because of his characteristics (“They (the trousers) won't fit that little squirt” said brothers alluding to Cinders). They also appear in the story enjoying the party with their corresponding girlfriends. At the end of the plot, their role changes completely, and they must do housework as a punishment. It is here where there is an image that shows to readers how they fly around wearing white dresses and clean products. There are also some men that turn up in the story but so unperceived. It is the band of the disco; all its members wear pants.

Concerning female characters, the main character is Princess Lovelpenny, the girl is defined as a pretty and rich princess. In the images her physical appearance is quite stereotypical: she is blonde, and she appears with her make up done, with painted nails and with an up sweep on top of her head.

However, she is wearing pants all through the story and that is a sign that somehow contrasts her role with the typical “damsel in distress” cliché. She is portrayed as intelligent, capable and confident, but not as passive, she seeks out true love in an active way. Her personality is described as kind, humorous, resourceful, and she is not afraid to shout when she is confronted with the monkey (when the prince becomes into his normal appearance, the princess Lovelpenny thinks she has been saved from the monkey by him).

The relationship between the Princess and the Prince is based on equality and mutual respect. In fact, it is the Princess Lovelpenny who proposes, and they eventually get married. Once they get married, he appears on the sofa while she is observing him just behind and this may show remnants of traditional gender role.

As for the fairy, she is certainly an intriguing character. She has no name and the first adjective used to describe her is “dirty”. She has her first appearance by falling down the chimney, where we can see her wearing a short dress in a rather unconventional way. She is shown as clumsy and unorthodox, but her clumsiness sets the story in motion and somehow forces Prince Cinders to embrace his true self. In a way, she turns out to be a supportive friend and a guide. In fact, the fairy’s role is to guarantee that all Prince’s wishes become real, but she turns Cinders into a monkey through her chaotic magic.

There is an illustration that represents the relationship between Cinders and the fairy in a visual manner: only the legs appear, and both characters are in front of the other, being the prince with both feet straight on. Unlike the Prince, the fairy is bending one of her knees trying to cover her other leg. Another image during the story depicts a tiny fairy compared to a bigger Cinders reinforcing their physical distance. Despite her apparent ineptitude the fairy helps again Cinders, when she turns his brothers into house fairies by the end of the tale.

Other women in the story are his brothers’ girlfriends, who only appear once being the copilot, and girls dancing at the disco, all of them wearing dresses. These characters are framed and defined within the colour-scheme of the disco: it is dark with different matching different greens, illuminated windows, bright letters of the disco’s name (Royal Disco) whereas the scenario is more colourful inside. In this scenario, Cinder’s brothers with their corresponding girlfriends appear.

In contrast with the above-mentioned characters, Prince Cinders is defined truly by its actions, as Lavandier (2003) states. An example of this takes place when Prince Cinders meets Princess Lovelpenny in the bus stop. She is scared at first but then, the shy and scared Prince Cinders runs away losing his jeans on the run and the idea of his awkwardness becomes visible. Some other activities that help determine the traits of the main characters happen in the house, the garden and bedroom.

The first one, the dark and stoned-wall house is the setup where Prince Cinders is comparing himself to a body builder from a magazine, with a black fireplace where some meal is being cooked on the background. Another situation lived at home is the encounter between Prince Cinders and Princess Lovelpenny in the presence of Cinder’s brothers, who witness how Prince Cinders puts the jeans on, and they fit. The brothers also appear at home at the beginning of the story and at the end, when they receive their punishment and become housework fairies.

## 4. Discussion and Conclusions

Perrault's story brings us closer to the structure of the classic tale, whereas Cole's embodies the inversions, ruptures and modifications that occur with the new interpretations, a story with a different Prince who happens to be a weaker masculine character, more real and often belittled by his brothers. Prince Cinders shows himself as very insecure about his looks (he wants to be hairy like his brothers but is accidentally transformed into a gorilla) and his personality.

The leadership is thus in the hands of a Princess who is beautiful but at the same time clever enough to close the turning point at the end of the story. She is the one who decides the fate of the brothers in the form of an enchantment. In this sense, fairy tales allow for multiple readings and are susceptible to numerous reinterpretations, two characteristics that have made it possible for them to survive over time and ensure their relevance in any era.

Cinderella, a universally recognized fairy tale, has been a staple in children's literature for centuries. The tale, however, is far from a mere narrative of rags to riches; it reflects prevailing societal values and expectations regarding gender roles. Indeed, the evolution of Cinderella offers a unique lens through which to examine changing attitudes toward gender roles. The tale of Cinderella has a very long story in cultures throughout the world. It has evolved from the ancient Chinese tale of Yeh-Shen to the Brothers Grimm's rendition, each version reflects the cultural and societal norms of its time.

Despite its many formats, the storyline depicts a suffering heroine, a cruel stepmother, and a magical transformation after attracting a prince with her beauty. The protagonist has traditionally been depicted as a submissive female whose main purpose in life is to secure a marital relationship. In addition, her success lies in the external intervention of a "fairy godmother" whose character reinforces the idea that only supernatural forces can help her achieve happiness.

Dowling (1981) coined the term "The Cinderella Complex", which roughly described the emotional dependency of females on males that led to gain a kind of "learned helplessness" and "blind devotion" towards men. As Joseph, Jasey and Thomas (2021) explain "Cinderella Complex takes its name from the Cinderella fairy tale princess, who waits for her prince charming to save her from her wicked stepmother and stepsisters. Most modern fairy tale adaptations, as well as the original versions, impose gender constraints on women" (p. 324-325).

Prince Cinders, on the other hand, differs from the classical version in many aspects. This tale is about a prince who wants to be a gentleman like his brothers, but he is converted accidentally into a gorilla by a disastrous fairy. He is unaware of his appearance so after the enchanter he really believes he is a royal man who can go to the party with dignity.

The clock strikes midnight, and he returns to his real appearance leaving behind a pair of jeans. Cinders' motivation is not escaping oppressive domestic circumstances, as in Cindella, but focuses on self-acceptance and embracing one's true self rather social requirements. Princess Lovelpenny, who is present during the party, falls for him and embarks on a quest to find the owner of the jeans. The skinny jeans only fit Cinders, so she proposes him immediately.

As Šarec Miskin (2019) points out “Prince Cinders is a picture book that promotes diversity, unity and equality, showing us that we all deserve to love and to be loved. It shows that masculinity is not a synonym for being big and hairy, but also small, weak, spotty and skinny” (p.23). Prince Cinders manages indeed to navigate the concept of equity, its successes and limitations to challenge existing structures of power and privilege.

As Wilbourn and Kee (2010) assert “knowledge of gender stereotypes develops early in childhood, and children as young as two years of age are aware of culturally-defined gender roles. As they grow up, they expect each gender to perform activities as they associated when they learnt about men and women.

As Kneeskern and Reeder (2022) state that as children grow older “they consolidate this knowledge and form rigid opinions about what each gender can do, and what it means if someone breaks the norms” (p. 1473). It is therefore necessary to re-explain the classical tales to revise patterns which can fully increase a more plural, less sexist and more inclusive education.

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