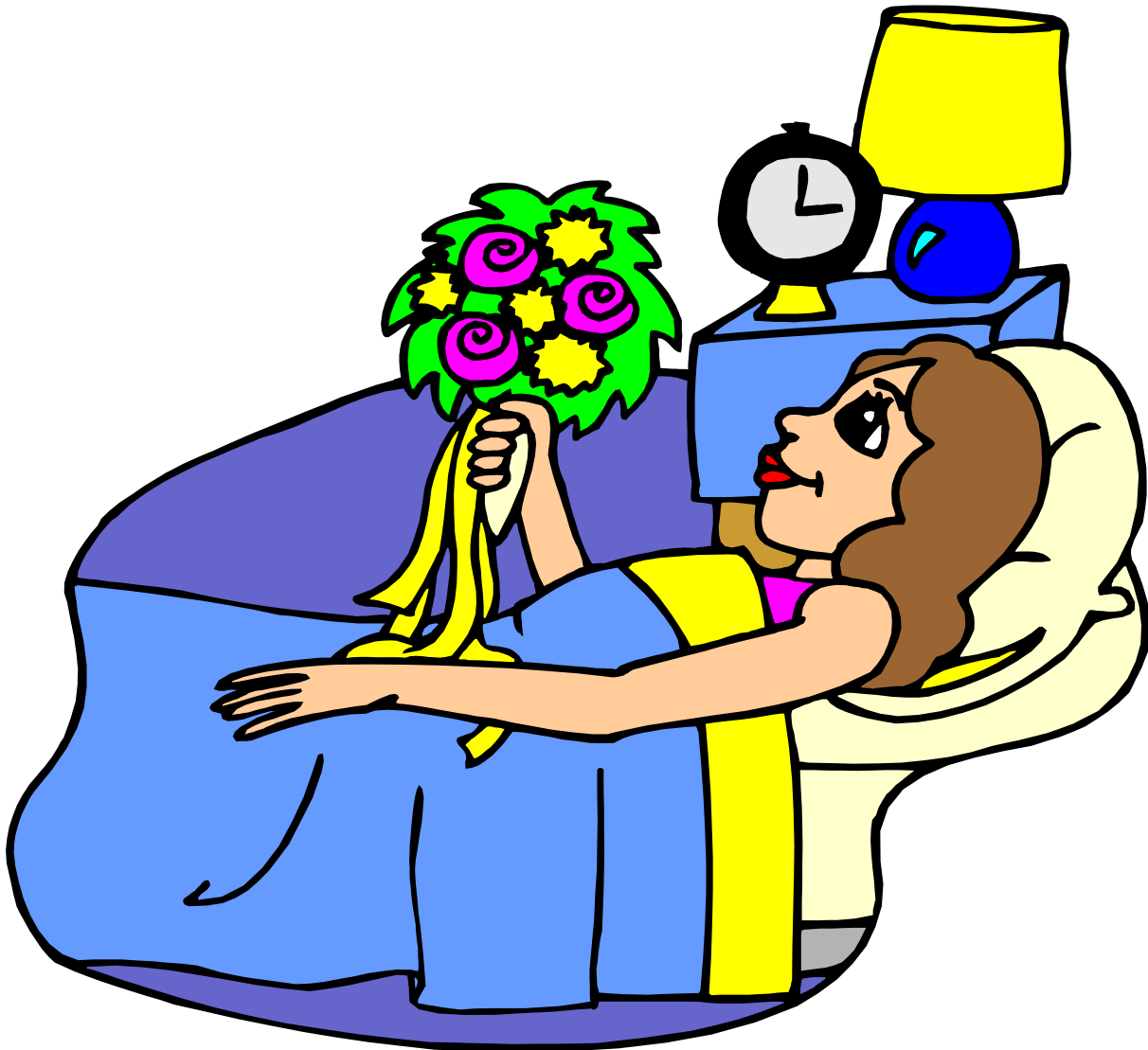


Sleeping Beauty: One Story, Many Interpretations



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Whether seen as a colorful animated film or read as a classic bedtime story, nearly every person has heard the tale of Sleeping Beauty. While this story is recognized worldwide, most people do not think much further than after the cheery recitation "...and they lived happily ever after". Upon further inspection, this seemingly quaint story contains depths that do not readily meet the eye. Most are unaware that behind this rather simple folktale lies a rich dialogue regarding the perception of women in society.

Many underlying currents run through the age-old tale of Sleeping Beauty. The most prevalent theme is that women are passive objects to be acted upon by outside, predominately male, forces. While this reflection may seem evident with a title such as "Sleeping Beauty", sleeping being a very passive activity in itself, many authors' perception and use of this agency tells it's own, unique story. Several authors use the circumstance of Sleeping Beauty to call for a change in the societal roles of women, while others use this condition to call attention to the great emphasis placed on physical beauty in our society; yet there are those who use the tale of Sleeping Beauty to reinforce conventional stereotypes. If it were not for the longstanding existence of this unbalanced distribution of agency, many authors would have been unable to use this tale to assert their beliefs. Consequently, the existence of this story is of great importance, but where did it come from?

The story of Sleeping Beauty existed for many years in its original form- a yarn passed down from generation to generation, in other words, an oral tradition. An earlier version of the tale of Sleeping Beauty exists, but its story reads similar to that of Snow White (Rosenbaum). The first probable documentation of this narrative was penned during the early 17th century in Italy by Giambattista Basile and was entitled *Sun, Moon, and Talia* included in his book *The Story of Stories* (Ashliman). Basile's book was based solely on oral traditions and comprises one of the most extensive collections of folktales of all time (Ashliman).

The next rendition of the tale was written, by the Frenchman Charles Perrault, sixty years after the publication of *Sun, Moon, and Talia*. Perrault gives his adaptation the title of *The Sleeping Beauty in the Wood* (Ashliman). The story of Sleeping Beauty went unwritten for the next 100 years until, in 1812, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm wrote their version of the tale. The Grimm Brothers produced a second, slightly altered, adaptation of the same title in 1857 (Ashliman). The differences that exist between the two versions are minimal. Their story, *Little Briar Rose*, is the most famous rendition and is ultimately responsible for the globalization of Sleeping Beauty.

To begin the examination of Sleeping Beauty, the historical tellings of Perrault and the Grimm Brothers need to be examined more closely. In both versions, the authors present Sleeping Beauty as an exceedingly docile heroine (Rosenbaum). At

times, she is almost an inanimate object maneuvered like a pawn on a chess board. This is most evident in the fact that she remains asleep during the majority of the story. The only real action ever seen from Sleeping Beauty is the physical act of pricking her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel, yet, even this was not a decision determined completely by her. Although she was curious about the spinning wheel, an object she had never previously seen, she was destined from birth to prick her finger (Rosenbaum). This theme of restricted female agency draws attention to the fact that many societies place women in submissive and lowly roles, at times, preventing them from speaking out against their oppressors. A great deal can be learned about the beliefs of a people from the stories they teach their children. If time was taken to read between the sometimes saccharine lines, the true moral of the story would be revealed- tales like Sleeping Beauty have been used to maintain the prestige of men.

Given the time and circumstances in which the Grimm Brothers' variation was penned, the placement of women in a submissive role was not uncommon. While there may have been occasional exceptions, a belief in female obedience was held by many men of this era. The unbalanced distribution of power in Sleeping Beauty was an attempt to perpetuate a vision of a male dominance. The audience is led to believe that the princess, upon awakening, finds all her dreams and desires fulfilled by the handsome prince. Perrault and the Grimm Brothers presume that a woman could have no further ambition in life than to marry, produce children, and dutifully maintain a household for the rest of her life. While the task of child-rearing can be quite satisfying, I wonder what Sleeping Beauty would have done with her life if given the opportunity to make her own decisions and not simply follow the ones chosen by her male authors.

Modern variations reveal further fascinating discussions of Sleeping Beauty. The first recent rendition is the animated film created by Walt Disney. His version of Sleeping Beauty combines aspects of previous versions into a cohesive and memorable classic incorporating Tchaikovsky's extraordinary score of the Sleeping Beauty ballet (Sleeping Beauty Dir. Walt Disney). Walt Disney's rendition of Sleeping Beauty is truly a masterpiece of artistic creation but it contains sexually biased undertones not readily apparent to the average viewer. Once acknowledged these traces of inequality become glaringly obvious. The predominant theme presented in Disney's version is "good woman versus bad woman", more specifically Princess Aurora versus Maleficent (Rosenbaum).

Disney's Sleeping Beauty, Princess Aurora, is the epitome of womanhood. She is blessed upon her birth with gifts of beauty and musical ability and is continually loving and obedient as well as naïve and gullible. Disney goes a step further in emphasizing the importance of obedience and passivity. In the versions of Perrault and the Grimms, Sleeping Beauty touches the spindle of the spinning wheel out of curiosity. In Disney's rendition, even that action of thought is taken away. Aurora touches the spindle because she is in a trance induced by the powerful Maleficent.

Maleficent, the evil sorceress responsible for the princess's provincial sleep, is presented as everything a woman should not be. Maleficent is influential and strong possessing extraordinary intellect rather than copious beauty (Rosenbaum). Her

features are harsh and unforgiving with satanic-like horns for hair and sallow, putrid skin. Her deep, commanding voice completes the disparity between herself and Aurora's rosy complexion and diminished melodious tones. Maleficent is hard and cruel, living alone on her distant, gloomy mountain, while Aurora maintains close relationships with three fairies and the animals of the forest (Rosenbaum). Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* subtly leaves the audience with the impression that appearances affect your ability to have intimate relationships. Aurora is beautiful and therefore may have many friends, but because Maleficent is unattractive she must remain alone.

According to Disney's interpretation, as a woman takes more control over her life, she becomes less of a woman (Rosenbaum). Maleficent does everything that is unacceptable of a woman. She thinks for herself, refusing to be a bystander in her own life. She dares to be alone and is portrayed as unhappy in her solitude reinforcing the misconception that a woman will be unhappy unless she is involved in an intimate relationship. In all ways, Maleficent is a direct opponent to male authority and consequently she is cast as the villain.

As a young girl, I was torn between the characters of Aurora and Maleficent. I loved Aurora because of the beauty, charm, and romance that existed around her and at the same time, I was in awe of Maleficent and her complete control over her henchmen. In the film, Maleficent had a pet crow that doubled as a personal spy. I can recall trying to catch a robin in my backyard to be my own emissary. Looking back, I see now that I was torn between becoming the perfect, refined young woman unquestioning of authority and becoming willful and self-autonomous like Maleficent. Disney does young girls an injustice by portraying these characteristics as absolute opposites. A woman can retain strength and power without compromising her femininity.

While the Disney film has a seemingly squeaky clean image, not all renditions of this story are as uplifting. Anne Sexton rewrote the tale of *Sleeping Beauty* in verse form setting the scene in 1971 (Rosenbaum). In the process of this recreation, Sexton puts a feminist twist on the classic story forcing readers to look beyond the surface and examine the content of this deceptively deep fairy tale. Her poem *Briar Rose* is a manifestation of a twentieth century woman's perception of *Sleeping Beauty*.

Sexton focuses on *Sleeping Beauty* as a person rather than a tool manipulated by the author for the sake of maintaining an interesting plot (Rosenbaum). In every rendition of *Sleeping Beauty*, the young woman was a tangible reward for the prevailing prince. She existed to be "given, taken, and acted upon by men" (Rosenbaum). Sexton takes this occurrence and uses it to describe how a woman would really feel in this situation. She tells of the *Sleeping Beauty*'s frustration and resentment regarding her circumstances. Sexton describes these feelings in vivid passages such as "I lie as still as a bar of iron. /You can stick a needle in my kneecap and I won't flinch. /I'm all shot up with Novocain. /This trance girl/ is yours to do with." (Sexton p. 111). In this excerpt, *Sleeping Beauty*'s frustration is evident and yet, she appears to simply accept her fate. Although strength is not seen in the classic sense of *Sleeping Beauty* directly confronting her oppressor, strength exists in her unbelievably steadfast endurance of domination

(Rosenbaum). Despite her strength, she is simply unable to break the cycle of passivity.

Sexton confronts the stereotypes of this classic fairy tale daring her readers to think outside the box. Her incorporation of contemporary developments, such as modern medicine and pharmaceuticals, into her poem displays how fairy tales can address the social concerns of today and not only those of “once upon a time” (Rosenbaum). Sleeping Beauty is described as “an insomniac.../ She could not nap /... without the court chemist/ mixing her some knock-out drops” (Sexton, p. 111). One of the most noticeable features of Sexton’s piece is that throughout the entire poem she never provides a description of Sleeping Beauty but rather an extensive description of her thoughts and feelings (Rosenbaum). This abstention is incredibly significant considering that beauty is one of the historically central concepts upon which the story was named. By refraining from commenting on the appearance of the young woman, Sexton’s expresses that it is not what is on the outside that we should value, it is what exists on the inside that is of importance.

In Sexton’s poem, the story of Sleeping Beauty takes a deeper and darker turn. Sleeping Beauty is the victim of incest by her father. In the Grimms’ versions of the tale, the king is protective and orders all the spinning wheels to be destroyed to save his daughter from her foretold fate. In her version, however, Sexton takes a father’s natural inclination to protect his daughter and turns into one of the greatest abuses of power- rape. Sexton uses sexual abuse to draw attention to Sleeping Beauty’s lack of authority in her circumstances.

The most significant contribution of Sexton’s poem *Briar Rose* is that it forces readers to look at the story from a completely different perspective. It raises questions about the way women have been and continue to be treated in many societies. It draws attention to the fact that Sleeping Beauty is more than a pretty face. She is breathing, thinking, feeling person who has been confronted with many terrible acts upon her mind and her body. Sexton’s poem makes us question our ideals by showing us that life does not always end with a “happily ever after” (Rosenbaum). She leaves her audience remembering the old saying “what doesn’t kill us, makes us stronger”. Her Sleeping Beauty personifies the strength of a Greek god and the reality of a Greek tragedy.

Feminist writings about fairy tales such as Sleeping Beauty are not limited to women. Josef Wittmann reappraises the agency of Sleeping Beauty from the male perspective. In his poem *Sleeping Beauty*, he speaks of how women have come to require a fairy tale ending in every relationship. Wittmann feels that women’s expectations are too high and that their desire to be swept off their feet is unrealistic in today’s society. His poem does not challenge the idea that the woman is a prize to be won; instead, it leaves the reader with the impression that there is simply no time for unreasonable fairy tales in real life (Rosenbaum). Wittmann states very plainly:

I’m not a prince,
I have no sword
nor have I time
to cut the hedge
to climb the wall

to give a kiss
 or to marry you...
 Tomorrow
 I must start work early
 (or I'll be fired) (Rosenbaum).

Wittmann's proclamation of realism in relationships is inspirational. Women should not have to feel that a man is a necessity for fulfillment of their dreams. Women are able to achieve great heights on their own if they simply recognize their potential and step up to the opportunity.

Girl, Forget that Prince! is a poem written by Josef Reding in response to the typical typecasts in fairy tales. Reding also condemns women for clinging to the need for a fairy tale rescue and calls women to move from a bystander to a participant in their lives. The first stanza very accurately sums up the theme of his poem:

No prince will come to save you
 if you stupidly doze away those years
 if you don't use your brains,
 and always put off thinking until tomorrow (Rosenbaum).

It is refreshing to see a man express rejection of the placement of women in passive role the exists in many cultures. If women are not persuaded by Sexton's subtle outcry for change, perhaps the existence of masculine support for reform will better persuade them to realize their potential.

In today's society nearly everything has become "PC", even the opening line to one of my favorite television programs (in Star Trek they no longer go "where no *man* has gone before" they go "where no *one* has gone before"). Is this a bad thing? I don't necessarily think so. This simply demonstrates that our society is becoming increasingly aware of how stereotypical gender roles affect our daily living. The belief in political correctness is the basis of James Finn Garner's *Sleeping Person of Better-Than-Average Attractiveness* (he even goes as far as to remove any hint of gender from words such as *person* or *women*). This rendition of Sleeping Beauty expresses concern for many issues that face to today's women. One problem Garner addresses is the emphasis on appearance in our society. Instead of blessing the royal infant with beauty and superficial talents, his fairies bestow her with "a body image she is comfortable with... a keen analytical mind... and good math skills" (Rosenbaum). In addition, it warns its audience that simply using politically correct terms is insufficient unless underlying societal problems are corrected (Rosenbaum).

Instead of condemning Sleeping Beauty to death, Garner's evil fairy curses the princess to "grow up thinking you can't be complete without a man, [to] put unrealistic hopes of perfect and total happiness on your marriage, and [to] become a bored dissatisfied, and unfulfilled housewife" (Rosenbaum). This is the typical passive role many women have come to view as a fate worse than death. An ironic twist exists in this tale. There is no happy ending. Although the last good fairy tries to nullify the princess's ominous destiny with her blessing, in the end, her proclamation only predicts the discovery of an enlightened suitor not the princess's

rejection of the suburban housewife role. The rescuer prince is dismayed to discover a woman whose only ambition is to be protected when he was expecting to find a strong, clever woman he could love on a more cognitive level. I think an unhappy ending is an incredible breakthrough for the story of Sleeping Beauty. Life consists of good times and bad times. If it was not for the existence of sorrow, we would not experience joy.

Each author uses Sleeping Beauty as a means of conveying his or her own beliefs. The Grimms establish her obedient role in hopes to further their belief in male authority. By training girls at a young age to believe they will only find happiness in a marriage dominated by their husbands, they are able to perpetuate their beliefs about the appropriate construction of society. Disney takes a strong woman and turns her into a demon continuing the belief that if a woman steps out of her powerless role she is no longer a “real” woman.

Sexton does not directly challenge the passivity of the character of Sleeping Beauty. Instead, she focuses on the feelings that this role creates, subtly calling for change. Unlike Sexton, both Wittman and Reding candidly disagree with the passive roles given to women. They challenge women to move from an inactive stance to a proactive position. Garner cleverly mocks the ideals held by our society throughout his politically correct version of Sleeping Beauty. With his unhappy ending, he shows that inevitably submissiveness will lead to unhappiness.

Every version of the fairy tale possesses distinctive characteristics that contribute to the colorful history of Sleeping Beauty. One might wonder, why, throughout the many versions, does sleeping beauty never really wake up? The answer to this question is that her authors do not want her to. Sleeping Beauty is a versatile means of social commentary by an author. The numerous authors of Sleeping Beauty have taken the concept of female agency and used it to convey their own unique perspectives. The tale of Sleeping Beauty remains significant because it allows its authors to address many issues of importance. Sleeping Beauty will continue to sleep in order to perpetuate societal change.