

https://dspace.org/

Tales we tell The potrayal of mothers in four popular childrens fairy tales and the influence on reading

Anna Nkomo; Aaliya Kimmie

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/41619
SCIELO SA

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Tales we tell: the portrayal of mothers in four popular children's fairy tales and the influence on reading

Sibhekinkosi Anna Nkomo[1] and Aaliya Kimmie[2]

anna.nkomo@wits.ac.za ORCID: 0000-0002-7428-9017
aaliya.kimmie@gmail.com ORCID: 0009-0000-1208-4051

Received: 14 October 2023
Accepted: 20 April 2024

Foundation Phase teachers need a wide, updated knowledge of children's literature and other texts to ignite learners' love for reading. Research shows that not much is being done to expand teachers' knowledge and expose them to a variety of children's literature. Thus, guided by a social semiotic theory, four popular fairy tales were selected for analysis. The qualitative content analysis focused on how mothers are portrayed in fairy tales, as mothers are considered the child's primary caregivers in many contexts. The findings of the study show that there is a dichotomous representation of mothers, where on the one hand, they can be seen as nurturing and loving and on the other hand, they can be seen as wicked and cruel. The implications of the findings suggest that it is important for teachers to be aware of what learners are reading so that they can advise and recommend relevant books. It is recommended that parents and teachers make thoughtful decisions about the kinds of texts they offer to young children. Children's literature authors need to be mindful of the messages they convey through texts and visuals as research suggests that repetitive stereotypical messages nurture lasting impressions on children.

Keywords: Children's literature, fairy tales, foundation phase, extensive reading, social semiotics

1 Introduction

Since ancient times, fairy tales have played an essential role in human culture, enthralling readers with their intriguing stories and fantastical worlds. However, underneath their enchanting surface, fairy tales frequently reflect and uphold societal norms and values. According to Talmon (2010:2), fairy tales are a symbolic window into the social, economic, and personal tribulations affecting the child and the human condition at large. Fairy tales have an influential role in children's literature, their perception of the world and people around them is also shaped and influenced. According to Taylor (2003:301), the texts we read in our childhood, shape our identity, and it is, therefore, vital to analyse how texts represent these gender norms, cultural values, and norms. This study analysed the portrayal of mothers in four popular fairy tales, namely, Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel. Many South African children growing up in resourced homes, schools, and digital home environments have been exposed to these fairy tales through books and other media. Due to their popularity with young children, these fairy tales have been translated into some of South Africa's 11 official languages and adapted to suit an African child.

In many contexts, mothers are considered the child's primary caregivers, but little is known about how their role is portrayed in fairy tales. Thus, the study focused on the visual and text messages of how mothers have been portrayed in fairy tales to understand the influence images and texts have on learners or readers. Since fairy tales portray a reflection of societal norms, the portrayal of mothers and especially stepmothers in many fairy tales often perpetuates certain gender roles and stereotypes which ultimately shape society's perception of motherhood. In fairy tales, one never shows compassion towards a stepmother as the stepmother is an archetypal image and not a true representation of a person who has values, desires, and thoughts (Djatmika, Santosa, Wiratno, Primasita & Khrisna, 2020:1). These tales frequently have female protagonists, especially mothers, who are essential to the development of both the storyline and the characters. Patel (2009:52) states that gender roles in fairy tales often have docile females and heroic males and that the gender archetypes of previous centuries remain.

In the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS, 2011:11) of South Africa, fairy tales are one of the prescribed texts for the Foundation Phase which learners should be exposed to during the literacy focus time. During this time, learners are expected to listen to texts, speak about those texts, read texts, and write about those texts (Department of Basic Education, 2011:12). However, the CAPS document does not provide clear guidelines on how to address, assess

1. Sibhekinkosi Anna Nkomo is Lecturer at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.
2. Aaliya Kimmie is Teacher at Parkview Junior School and a University of Witwatersrand graduate, South Africa.

or introduce these texts to the learners by choosing the appropriate texts and engaging with these texts in a way that also addresses the societal issues that are brought up in fairy tales. This study, therefore, seeks to analyse how mothers are portrayed in these fairy tales to understand the influence images and texts might have on learners or readers. Four popular children's stories in most English-speaking families, namely, Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel, will be analysed. An analysis of these texts will inform our practice as Foundation Phase teachers and other Foundation Phase teachers on how to select stories to read in the classrooms.

2 Research problem

Many children are exposed to selected fairy tales early in life through books (reading), watching television, or storytelling, yet not much is known about both the positive and negative influence the visual and text messages have on children. According to Patel (2009:1), fairy tales offer children morals to live up to and they have a lasting effect on the child's psyche than simply a lesson learned. Therefore, a child's life, world view and societal norms can be easily influenced by these fairy tales, yet in reality, the world is the opposite of what is portrayed in fairy tales. For example, most love fairy tales such as Cinderella and Rapunzel, end with the line "They lived happily ever after…" Yet, in real life, not all love stories end with a happily ever after as some couples might break up or get divorced. In addition, many fairy tales do not narrate what happens when the 'Prince or the Princess" gets married yet in real life, couples have to navigate through their marriage which is not represented in fairy tales.

Of relevance to this study is that most research on fairy tales focuses on the stepmothers and hardly mentions biological mothers as they are either dead or not mentioned at all. According to Djatmika et al. (2020:1), the character of the wicked stepmother is most popular in fairy tales and is always enthralling to scrutinise. This means that the biological mother character is hardly ever scrutinised as they do not feature as much. Thus, the purpose of this study was to analyse how the popular fairy tales Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel portray mothers through texts and images and how these might influence the child's worldview.

3 Literature review

3.1 The importance of children's literature

Bishop (1990) used the metaphor "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" as a way of describing the role of children's literature in young children. According to Bishop (1990:9), books are like windows that "offer views of worlds that may be real or imagined," and "are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created by the author." Like a mirror, through books, "we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience," which, Bishop (1990: \9) argues, is a "means of self-affirmation" (Bishop, 1990). In this sense, children's literature can represent a mirror for society, both reflecting the reality we live in and "projecting how we want our children to be" (Dahlen, 2020:83).

The above metaphor neatly sums up the importance and the impact children's literature has on children; thus, children must be presented with good literature because, "children, especially in the early years, are like little sponges, absorbing all the information around them and then actively making sense of it." (Hunter, 2018: para 6). Exposure to literature through books and other forms of media helps to shape thoughts, perceptions, and behaviours, and children adopt the assumptions and beliefs of media content as reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). For example, it was found that children will learn gender stereotypes through the context and gender label of protagonists in storybooks, thus, supporting the idea that children are influenced by what they are reading (Seitz, Lenhart & Rübsam, 2020). The impact of the representation of males and females is an important consideration when looking at fairy tales that are impactful on children's identities as they are reading these books or being read to. Gomez-Najarro (2019) discussed how the stereotypical portrayals of families and gender in the books learners are reading in class can not only impact their identity but also force them to accept that the world is portrayed as seen in the books they are reading. This assumption of the world can impact the way they view the world and the people in it; thus, teachers and parents need to choose books that reflect the diversity of learners' lives and identities to reflect a more accurate reality (Adam & Barratt-Pugh, 2019; Beland & Mills, 2001; Gomez-Najarro, 2019).

Therefore, it is important to analyse the kinds of representations conveyed to children and how they might influence their attitudes about opposite genders, elders, and races. Teachers, parents, and guardians have a responsibility to analyse the kinds of literature that children are exposed to as children are particularly vulnerable to media messages and use what they see in media to create their beliefs about themselves and others. However, in South Africa, not all preservice teachers come to university with a deep knowledge of children's literature from their childhoods (Dixon & Janks, 2018). In addition, many schools are under-resourced, so learners have limited or no access to both children's fiction and nonfiction texts. It is only recently that attention has been paid to publishing children's literature in African languages, for example, Zenex Foundation recently launched uLwazi Lwethu African Languages reading materials. Unless children have had stories read

or told to them at home, their knowledge is often limited to graded or basal readers and sometimes big books that they encounter at school (Evans, Joubert & Meier, 2017). When parents or teachers read to children, the books they are reading send different messages about culture, power, and identity through images and texts (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014).

It is against this background that this study sought to analyse what children have been reading and what they are currently reading to influence practice. This study aimed to analyse how mothers are depicted in selected fairy tales and how these portrayals might influence young readers' perceptions of mothers. Mother's impact on children is very significant because mothers are active in caring for their children and reading to them while also giving them support. Thus, it is important to consider how they are represented in fairy tales to analyse if they are a true reflection of their role in children's lives. This can then provide teachers and parents with a reference to which fairy tales are valuable to the development of children. Findings will also influence teachers and children's authors to decide how diverse books need to be chosen for the classroom and how the portrayal of mothers may need to be (re)-evaluated.

3.2 Fairy tales as a genre in children's literature

Research shows that many South African children have limited exposure to books at home with, two-thirds reporting having no books or less than five books at home (Vosloo, Walton & Deumert, 2009; Reading Survey, 2023). Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to introduce children's literature to the learners in a way that enhances learners' minds. Children's literature can be divided into different genres, namely, fiction, fairy tales, poetry, non-fiction, and biography. This research focuses on fairy tales as they are the most popular genre that many children are exposed to earlier in their lives.

According to Rahman (2017:338), fairy tales are part of children's literature which emerges from oral storytelling passed down from one generation to another and it focuses on life lessons. Fairy tales have played a significant role in many cultures for many years and have been used to instil morals and values in young children. Patel (2009:6) concurs that most fairy tales come from oral folk traditions where members of a tribe would explain natural occurrences and celebrate rites of marriage and conquest where tradition changes and is encouraged by different social states. Teverson (2013:5) explains that a fairy tale is a multifaceted genre and a cultural palimpsest; in addition to speaking to the time it is told, it evokes memories of earlier eras when it was popular and flourished.

According to Koutsompou (2016:213), stories are more significant for children as they formulate their own identities through the events that occur in the stories which lead them to make comparisons between what the characters in the stories encounter compared to their own lives. Stories can never be impartial as each story carries a writer's beliefs, thoughts and perspectives meaning that the way characters are portrayed in stories is influenced by the writer (Chou, 2007:57). Thus, quality children's literature should be books that contain illustrations, colour and are easy to read where pictures play a vital role in storytelling (Reichertz, 1997:6). Reading material must be easy to read for children to find pleasure in reading. This is because the main purpose of children's literature is for amusement, as well as teaching and learning, meaning that stories should entertain children whilst providing them with opportunities to learn and think critically (Koutsompou, 2016:217). This study focused on analysing six (6) fairy tales to understand lessons that might be drawn from the way mothers are portrayed as the values of these fairy tales can be easily transmitted to children. Fairy tales play an important role in how social values are transmitted to children (Gibson, 1988) and are important pieces of children's literature and they have a lasting impact on our society (Nanda, 2014:246). This is why it is crucial to consider how these representations affect children's views of gender roles.

3.3 Mothers' portrayal in fairy tales

The portrayal of mothers is one of the most prevalent topics in fairy tales. It must be stated clearly that the word "mother" used in this study refers to the "mother" a woman who gave birth to a child or a person who is acting as a mother to a child (Oxford Languages, 2000). The term "stepmother" according to Cordiano (2015:401) is the woman who becomes a parent following the death or absence of the biological mother and takes on the parental role. According to Cordiano (2015:399), fairy tales have a clear-cut opposition between mothers and stepmothers . Society portrays them as two females existing in one family where one is always seen as good and the other as evil. In many fairy tales, stepmothers are frequently portrayed as wicked, this is because the stepmother is seen as replacing the biological mother in all aspects. Whereas mothers are represented as nurturing and loving or not represented at all.

Historically, mothers were portrayed in fairy tales as nurturing and caring figures, providing emotional support and guidance to their children. Gibson (1988) states that the archetype of the portrayal of mothers exists in the human mind as we all have a general idea of what a mother should be like and how mothers should be represented which differs from era to era. Mothers are typically portrayed as being nurturing and loving, which supports traditional gender roles that emphasize women taking care of people and offering emotional support. Talmon (2010:9) states that in fairy tales, mothers become a haven for the child in times of trouble and despair and further emphasises that even though the mother is absent or dead,

she is still able to guide the child through struggles in symbolic forms. Therefore, the image of mothers always being nurturing and a safe place for children is a common feature in fairy tales.

However, there is a dichotomous representation of mothers, on the one hand, they can be seen as nurturing, loving, and good, and on the other hand they can be seen as evil, wicked, and cruel. Elzohiery (2022:5) explains that motherhood is always divided into two groups: evil and angelic where the angelic mother sacrifices her life for the sake of her children. Henry (2017, p. iii) states that "the evil mothers are often stepmothers, who have taken the place of the deceased mother." Stepmothers were frequently portrayed as cruel, harming their stepchildren, or giving preference to their biological children. This picture of stepmothers dates back to a time when stepfamilies were frequently viewed as problematic, and remarriage was regarded as a social taboo. Cordiano (2015:401) states that a stepmother is less than a mother. It is then represented in fairy tales where the stepmother is seen as evil because she has taken over the place of the deceased mother, who was pure of heart and good (Henry, 2017). Al-Barazenji (2015:47) further explains this concept and states that the king always replaces his lost wife further emphasising how children can view the stepmother as evil or wicked as she is quite literally, replacing their mother. Nanda (2014:247) states that in many fairy tales, the stepmothers bear negative and repulsive traits such as vanity, jealousy, and pride. This is why the depiction of stepmothers and mothers differs depending on the era in which the fairy tales were written.

Portraying stepmothers as vindictive and cruel feeds into harmful gender stereotypes by implying that women who do not fit into the mould are dangerous and unreliable. Nanda (2014:248) further emphasises this by saying that fairy tales embody the ways that societies attempt to silence and oppress women making them passive, submissive, and self-sacrificing and if they are not and are rather independent, intelligent, or ambitious, then they are automatically viewed as cruel or wicked. Patel (2009:17) agrees with Nanda (2014) and states that female characters who show signs of intelligence or ambition are evil and women who have desires are villainous and will be punished.

These gendered norms may limit children's opportunities and alter how they view themselves and others, which can be detrimental to their development. Children's conceptions of gender roles and family structure are significantly influenced by how mothers and stepmothers are portrayed in fairy tales. While mothers are frequently presented as nurturing and kind, stepmothers are frequently characterised as cruel and wicked. These representations may hinder children's understanding of blended families and non-traditional gender roles as well as transmit negative stereotypes (Filipović, 2018:311). Therefore, gender roles in fairy tales need to be addressed as society aims to construct the term gender.

3.4 Gender roles in fairy tales

Fairy tales embody the ways that societies attempt to silence and oppress women and how there are traditional sexist roles that portray women in fairy tales (Nanda, 2014:249). Female characters are either portrayed as perfectly good or evil and these gender archetypes exist because of previous centuries' thinking. This depicts women in only two ways; either wicked and full of spite or kind but killed off (Patel, 2009; Al-Barazenji, 2015). Gender representations in fairy tales are a result of traditional gender roles that exist in the real world. According to Garduno-Jaramillo (2017:7), it is impossible to change common perspectives that exist in society about gender as gender is socially constructed and society aims to defend these constructions.

In most fairy tales, mothers are not present or are dead because of what was happening in society at the time. Stepmothers, aunties, and grandmothers would assume the role of a mother in a child's life, or children were left to take care of themselves. For example, in the fairy tale Cinderella, her mother died when she was a baby, and her father remarried a lady who assumed the role of Cinderella's stepmother. In many fairy tales, stepmothers are generally portrayed as wicked and evil and assert their power over their stepdaughters because they feel threatened by them. Whereas biological mothers are typically represented as stay-at-home mothers who look after the family or they are kind and sweet mothers who unfortunately pass away (Patel, 2009:24). Henry (2017: iii) states that fairy tales are unable to meet the unattainably high standards of good mothers hence, in fairy tales, mothers are condemned as bad and evil.

The way language and images are used to portray female characters, namely mothers, in fairy tales, can influence how children view mothers and stepmothers as children's literature is very influential on children. The use of words like 'wicked' and 'evil' to associate the stepmother indicates how language is used to portray one aspect of the mother in fairy tales. Patel (2009:15) states that fairy tales also indoctrinate children with ideals that may be outmoded given the economic and sociocultural changes. Al-Barazenji (2015:49) adds that fairy tales tend to give female characters the role of a witch, maid, or enchanted princess as these roles seem to embrace certain characteristics traditionally linked to femininity. Thus, fairy tales have a lasting impact on our society and educators and parents need to analyse these fairy tales carefully before introducing them to the children as children are likely to adopt these views and images depicted in fairy tales (Cekiso, 2017). Teachers and guardians need to find ways to turn these stereotypical portrayals in fairy tales into something positive for young children and allow them to see the positives in different situations.

4 Theoretical framework

The analysis process of the four-fairy tales was guided by the social semiotic theory (van Leeuwen, 2005). A social semiotic theory focuses on meaning-making by analysing semiotic interactions and representations such as language, images, and gestures (van Leeuwen, 2005:93). Social semiotics views everything as holding a social and cultural meaning, our language, images, gestures, and simple everyday activities are specific to our social and cultural context according to van Leeuwen (2005:4). Thus, when we are analysing the fairy tales, we considered every aspect such as images, writing, and design that could represent and influence the reader's cultural attitudes and values.

Specifically, the study draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's Grammar of Visual Design (GVD) which draws on systematic functional linguistics (SFL) where there is a focus on the discourse and linguistic system and the complex network of meaning potential behind these (Heberle & Constanty, 2016:90). Drawing on the GVD from Kress and van Leeuwen the researchers analysed the fairy tales using three functions of representational, interactive, and compositional/textual meanings. Analysing representational meanings entailed looking at the nature of events, how events are sequenced, and the characters involved in the image. For interactive meanings, we looked at the relationships between the people in the images of the fairy tales and the reader. This meant analysing the visual aspects that engage the reader such as the use of colour, angles and the contact between the reader and the characters in the fairy tale. Finally, the textual meanings focused on the layout and framing of the books. In the case of the selected fairy tales, we looked at how the representational and interactive create a whole by examining the elements of the fairy tales such as the writing and images.

5 Methodology

This is a qualitative study as we analysed existing texts, focusing on images and texts to understand the portrayal of mothers in fairy tales. Thus, a qualitative content analysis was deemed appropriate for this study as its purpose is to find meaning in texts (Atkinson, 2017:84). In this study, we analysed images, plots, characters, settings, tones, and themes to provide a more insightful analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2013:5) state that quantitative research includes the use of inductive, theory-generating research. The qualitative content analysis uses two methods, deductive and inductive methods (Atkinson, 2017:89). Deductive method looks at reading texts using codes where the researcher would read a text and write key factors that align with the four fairy stories, whereas inductive methods look at the texts, plot, characters, settings, tones, and themes related to the research questions (Atkinson, 2017:85-88). This allows for the researcher to make informed classifications on the themes that emerge in the stories (Atkinson, 2017:89). Therefore, in this study we used both the inductive and deductive methods to closely analyse the four-fairy tales and to identify the themes that emerge from them in depth.

5.1 Data collection instruments

The main research instrument that was used was document analysis. To interpret the data, document analysis requires the researcher to read documents that contain findings and images (Bowen, 2009:27). Table 1 below shows the information on the fairy tale analysed.

Table 1: The selected fairy tales

Title	Author	Example of South African adaptation/ translation
Cinderella	Grimm Brothers (1995)	Translated and adapted into Afrikaans as Aspoestertjie
Snow White	Grimm Brothers (1995)	Translated in Afrikaans, isiZulu
Sleeping Beauty	Disney (1972)	Translated in Afrikaans, isiZulu
Rapunzel	Grimm Brothers (1995)	Refilwe/ uRefilwe (Zukiswa Wanner)

The criteria for suitability were selecting fairy tales that were deemed popular with young children. These fairy tales should also have a mother figure as a live character, mentioned dead or not mentioned at all. We analysed these fairy tales by looking at the imagery and text of each fairy tale how they portray mothers in each fairy tale, and what image the authors put forward of mothers through their visuals and written messages.

5.2 Data analysis

A multimodal social semiotic perspective (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996) was used to analyse the fairy tales to examine the portrayal of mothers and the messages being conveyed, through the portrayals, to the readers. A multimodal social semiotic

analysis was applied to the visual and linguistic aspect that dominates most communication. It is a theoretical perspective that brings all socially organised resources (such as images, writing and speech) that people use to make meaning into one descriptive and analytical domain (Bezemer, Jewitt, Diamantopoulou, Kress & Mavers, 2012). Using a semiotic approach (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996) for analysing the fairy tale resulted in a descriptive interpretation of the fairy tales. Social semiotics emphasises three important functions that can be used in interpreting fairy tales.

These three functions of a social semiotic nature used to interpret fairy tales were representational meanings, interactive meanings, and compositional/textual meanings (Heydenrych, 2020; Heberle & Constanty, 2016). To identify the recurring themes that relate to the research questions, a thematic content analysis was the best method to use guided by Braun and Clarke (2012:57). The first stage entailed sifting through multiple fairy tales and only four were chosen. This involved reading the selected fairy tales repeatedly, making mental notes on the texts, keywords and visuals that arose and annotating as we read.

The chosen fairy tales were deemed most common because many children have heard or watched them on television, and they have been adapted to suit South African children. We looked for fairy tales that had mothers in them, whether the mother was mentioned, alive or dead.

The second stage entailed noting down key features of the data that related to the research questions. In the third stage, we used the features in stage two to identify the themes. This was followed by reviewing and choosing the themes that best answered the research questions also guided by the semiotic theory focusing on the representational, interactive, and compositional meaning of the texts and images. The final stage was synthesising the analysis of the themes identified in the texts and images. These findings formed the basis of our conclusions about the portrayal of mothers in four popular fairy tales.

5.3 Ethical considerations

This study focused on analysing four fairy tales and no human participants were involved. Thus, an ethics waiver certificate was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the School of Education at the University of Witwatersrand before the study commenced. The ethics protocol number is 2023ECE030H.

6 Results

The analysis process provided some insights into how mothers are portrayed in fairy tales. Three basic kinds of gender stereotypes were prevalent in the fairy tales which are personality traits where mothers are portrayed as loving, caring, evil, or witches. Secondly, an emphasis is made on their domestic behaviours, for example, mothers are expected to take care of their children. Finally, their physical appearance is emphasised through visuals and colour. For example, women are portrayed as beautiful or ugly and are also expected to dress and groom in ways that are stereotypical of their gender. These are further categorised into five sub-themes as follows:

- Absent mothers.
- A mother's role is fluid, it can be played by any female in a child’s life.
- Mothers are kind and caring.
- Mothers are evil.
- Stereotype of mothers according to their appearance (These exaggerated gender stereotypes can make relationships between people difficult).

6.1 Mothers are portrayed as absent figures in a child’s life

Four of the fairy tales analysed portrayed mothers as absent figures in the child’s life. This could be because the mother died during childbirth or is not featured as a character in the book. For example, in the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel, the mothers are alive, but not mentioned in the tales and are not present in the life of the children. According to Henry (2017:11), mothers are portrayed as absent because, in the past, death in childbirth occurred frequently in the early modern era. Mothers’ never survived childbirth hence, fairy tales portrayed this real-life situation and the human condition. To cover the gap of the absence of a mother in a child’s life, in the fairy tale Cinderella, the mother is depicted as an inanimate entity which is the tree. Children who might have lost their mothers due to death will find a sense of security in the absence of their mothers and will identify with and relate to the characters in the story. The absent mother guides the child through struggles (Talmon, 2010:3). Thus, fairy tales often depict a world where it was a norm for mothers to die in childbirth. According to Talmon (2010:2), fairy tales are a symbolic window into the social, economic, and personal tribulations affecting the child and the human condition at large. Therefore, this theme's implication for readers and children is that they are confronted with unavoidable life circumstances. There may be a learner in the classroom who lost their mother at a very young age or never got to know their mother. Knowing that their mother is watching over them might be

very comforting. This kind of fairy tale can be used by teachers in subjects such as Life Skills, to confront difficult social issues and topics such as death and losing a loved one.

In some fairy tales, mothers are not mentioned because of issues around race and gender representation in media. For example, in a study on race and gender representation in children's books, females were shown primarily in the images in storybooks rather than in the texts (Adukia, Eble, Harrison, Runesha & Szasz, 2021). It was also found that females were less likely to be represented in the text of a sample of award-winning books and white males were more likely to be represented (Adukia et al, 2021). Informed by the findings of this study, authors of children's literature should work towards bridging this gap by making women, and mothers visible in their writing.

6.2 The portrayal of a mother's role as fluid

The fluid role of a mother is portrayed in two fairy tales, Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty. In these fairy tales, mothers are alive, but some individuals also play the motherly role in their lives. For example, in Rapunzel, the witch becomes a motherly figure for her by watching over her and raising her as her own for 16 years. Although the actions of the witch were evil, she remained the only motherly figure that Rapunzel knew her whole life. When Rapunzel finds the prince and gets married, she never goes looking for her biological parents, an indication that she considers the witch as her mother.

In Sleeping Beauty, Aurora's mother is alive but because she had to be protected from Maleficent, the three fairies raised Aurora as their own. The three fairies are the motherly figures in Aurora's life. They gave her shelter, clothes, and food. When Aurora was in trouble and facing danger, it was the three fairies who protected and fought for her. Even when she got married, the images do not show the Queen being with Aurora but show the three fairies being around her.

With the rise of extended families and migration in our society, these fairy tales teach children to accept and respect adult figures in their lives regardless of them not being their biological parents. The fairy tales also prepare children for such a time when their biological parents leave perhaps due to work or death, it gives them the understanding that it is okay to have another motherly figure in their life. The learners will have a sense of security that even though they might not have a present mother, at least they have a mother who loves and protects them and watches over them. Thus, Patel (2009:5) states that fairy tales teach us moral lessons and bring us comfort and a sense of security.

6.3 Personal traits: mother portrayed as loving and caring or evil and wicked

Mothers being portrayed as evil is the most common theme of how stepmothers are represented in fairy tales. For example, Cinderella, Snow White and Rapunzel have never experienced a loving, kind, and caring stepmother. All the women playing the mother role are presented as stepmothers witches, evil, wicked, and always punishing or torturing their stepchildren. Cinderella is forced to do all the housework and is not allowed to go to the ball. Snow White was neglected and chased out of her home and was ordered to be killed. Snow White was also offered a poisonous apple by her stepmother in an attempt to get rid of her. Rapunzel was locked up in a tower without any communication with the outside world and her hair was cut off by her stepmother, the witch.

Talmon (2010:1) states that the replacement of the biological mother with the wicked stepmother is a well-known motif in many fairy tales and that the stepmother is always portrayed as cruel or neglectful. The implications this has on the readers and the learners is that some learners may have a stepmother at home, or their fathers may be remarrying meaning that they will get a stepmother. When reading these fairy tales, the reader may assume that all stepmothers are evil and will torture or punish them. Learners may become fearful of building a relationship with their stepmother because of these portrayals. Talmon (2010:2) states that fairy tales offer a glimpse into the emotional world of the child and offer a narrative format to experienced stressors.

However, some fairy tales portray biological mothers as loving and caring. For example, while alive, Cinderella's mother is portrayed as caring as she promises Cinderella that she will always look down on her from heaven and be near her. Cinderella's mother is still portrayed as loving and caring being represented as a tree that grants her wishes and makes sure that no hardships follow her. In Snow White, her mother is depicted as caring and thoughtful. In Sleeping Beauty, even though Aurora's mother is alive, it is the three fairies who become the motherly figures in Aurora's life. The fairies are portrayed as loving and caring as they protect Aurora so that Maleficent does not find her. The fairies treat Aurora as their own as in the story it says, "they had reared the child as their own." This shows the love they have for Aurora. When Aurora is upset and is seen crying, the fairies try to cheer her up and comfort her. When Aurora falls into her cursed sleep, the fairies are seen crying and come up with a plan to save Aurora.

These are all aspects of a caring and loving mother. In Rapunzel, her mother is also portrayed as loving and caring, even if it was for a short period. As her mother was getting more ill, all she wanted was the Rapunzel lettuce in the witches' garden, so much so, that the husband went to get it for his wife. When Rapunzel is taken away from her mother and father,

in the images, her mother is seen crying and holding onto her husband for support. This shows how Rapunzel's mother is loving and caring and does not want her child to leave her.

The portrayal of mothers as loving and caring gives young children a positive perspective on mothers. They show children that by nature, mothers are loving people. In the absence of a biological mother, there is someone always willing to fill in that gap and show them motherly love and affection. Through these fairy tales, young children can also learn how to love and care for other people.

6.4 Physical appearance: mother's outward appearance vs stepmother's appearance

In most fairy tales, the way biological mothers are presented through images and described through text is different from the way stepmothers or witches are presented. For example, in Sleeping Beauty, the images show the Queen wearing a pastel blue and purple dress, which according to Kartashkova and Belyaeva (2022:206) represents honesty, devotion, and noble heartedness. The three fairies each have different bright colours they wear. Flora is red, Fauna is green and Merryweather is blue. These colours represent sweetness, bravery, devotion, and youth. The fairies and the mother's outward appearance matter as it gives the readers the image that mothers are loving, caring and by using bright colourful colours, it resonates with learners and children by saying this mother is fun and loving and friendly.

In Snow White, her mother's appearance shows beauty as there are soft facial features and she is wearing bright clothes. The Queen has very soft features such as her nose, her lips, and her eyebrows indicating she is a very soft and gentle queen. The Queen is wearing a rose-coloured dress which according to Kartashkova and Belyaeva (2022:207), symbolises sweetness and noble heartedness. However, there is a huge contrast between the Queen and the evil stepmother. The new Queen or stepmother has striking features, a sharp nose, sharp eyebrows, and a sharp jawline indicating she is a powerful character. The stepmother is wearing a green dress which is a big contrast to the sweet Queen's rose-coloured dress and the use of dark colours emphasises evil and darkness.

In Rapunzel, her mother is depicted as kind and concerned about her child as she is holding her belly and looking out the window longing for not only her child to come but for the lettuce in the garden. She has very soft features such as her nose, lips, and eyebrows. Her hair is in a bun indicating she is a very soft and gentle character but also a poor mother as there is not a lot in her house. There is an immediate contrast in the colours and depiction of her mother to the witch. The witch is depicted in black and dark purple colours, which according to Kartashkova and Belyaeva (2022:207), symbolises gloom and wickedness.

The way biological mothers and stepmothers are presented in the fairytales is problematic as they can give the impression that the colours of clothes and facial features determine whether a person is good or bad. Children will think that if their stepmothers wear dark colours, then she is evil or if someone wears bright colourful clothes then they are good. However, the colour of clothes and what someone wears do not define the type of character they are. It is also important to highlight that times have changed; in our communities we see a rise in caring and loving stepparents.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

As discussed in the article, young children's beliefs and perceptions about life are easily influenced by what they are exposed to which includes images and media messages. This means that parents, guardians, teachers, and authors have a significant role in reading material for young children as they "…hold great power over the socialization and self-concept of young people" (Levinson, 2020). If teachers and parents are more attentive to the type of texts, in this case, fairy tales that children are exposed to through books and television, they have the power to influence children's literature authors, play writers, publishers, and librarians (Rogers, 2021). For example, there needs to be a shift in culture in how stepmothers are represented in many fairy tales to move away from the stereotype that stepmothers are evil. How mothers are being represented in texts and images may influence the way learners perceive mothers and potentially their mothers. These representations may hinder children's understanding of blended families and non-traditional gender roles as well as transmit negative stereotypes (Filipović, 2018:310).

According to Koutsompou (2016:213), stories are more significant for children as they formulate their own identities through the events that occur in the stories which leads them to make comparisons between what the characters in the stories encounter compared to their own lives. This means that through fairy tales, learners can make comparisons between the characters and their own lives. Therefore, educators can use the findings in this study to encourage young learners to think critically about the issues that arise in fairy tales. Fairy tales selected for the classroom need to be based on the messages they give the readers and how the portrayal of the characters in the stories may impact the learners' lives. Thus, there is a need for updated fairy tales. Patel (2009:15) states that fairy tales indoctrinate children with ideals that are outdated given the current dramatic economic, social, and cultural changes that have occurred over the past two centuries.

References

Al-Barazenji, L. I. A. 2015. Women's voice and images in folk tales and fairy tales. *International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences,* 1(1): 47–53.

Atkinson, J.D. 2017. *Journey into social activism: qualitative approaches*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Bishop, R.S.1990. Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom,* 6 (3): ix-xi.

Bowen, G.A. 2009. Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal,* 9(2): 27–40.

Braga, A. 2022. The importance of children's representation in literature and media. *Children's Rights, Education, Empowerment,* [Online]. https://www.humanium.org/en/the-importance-of-childrens-representation-in-literature-and-media/ (16 February 2022).

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2012. Thematic analysis. In H, Cooper, P. M. Camic, D.L. Long, A.T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K.J. Sher (Eds.), APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology. *Washington, DC: American Psychological Association*, (2): 57-71.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. 2013. *Successful qualitative research: a practical guide for beginners*. London: SAGE

Cordiano, A. 2015. Fairy tales and stepmothers: the extended families in a legal perspective. *Italian Sociological Review*, 5(3): 399.

Dahlen S.P. 2020. We need diverse books: diversity, activism, and children's literature. In: op de Beeck N. (eds) *Literary Cultures and Twenty-First-Century Childhoods.* Literary Cultures and Childhoods. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Department of Basic Education. 2011. *Curriculum and assessment policy statement: Grades R-3 English Home Language*. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

Djatmika, Santosa, R., Wiratno, T., Primasita, F. A. and Khrisna, D. A. N. 2020. *ICCoLLiC 2020: Proceedings of the First International Conference on Communication, Language, Literature, and Culture, ICCoLLiC 2020, 8-9 September 2020, Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia*. European Alliance for Innovation.

Elzohiery, A. 2022. How I depict your mother: a critical multimodal analysis of the representation of mothers in selected Egyptian memes. *Cairo Studies in English*, 0(0): 0.

Filipović, K. 2018. Gender representation in children's books: case of an early childhood setting. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education,* 32(3): 310-325.

Garduno-Jaramillo, I.E. 2017. Once upon a gender role: re-envisioning the strength of females in fairy tales (unpublished honours research report, University of Central Florida, Orlando).

Gerbner, G. and Gross, L. (976. Living with television: the violence profile. *Journal of Communication*, 26 (2): 172- 199.

Gomez-Najarro, J. 2019. Children's Intersecting Identities Matter: Beyond Rabbits and Princesses in the Common Core Book Exemplars. *Children's Literature in Education.* 392-410.

Heberle, V.M. and Constanty, V. 2016. Meaning without words: analysing the picture book Barbaro through a social semiotic perspective. *Letras, Santa Maria*, *26*, 89–109.

Henry, G.D. 2017. Murchenmutter ~ Fairy Tale Mothers. Union Digital Works. [Online]. https://digitalworks.union.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=theses (16 February 2022).

Heydenrych, E.F. 2020. *A multimodal analysis of the representations of gender incontemporary South African children's picture books produced by Book Dash*. Rhodes University: Grahamstown.

Hunter, E. 2018. Children are like little sponges': early learning can set them up for life. [Online]. from https://theirworld.org/news/early-learning-sets up young-children-for-life (16 February 2022).

Kartashkova F.I. and Belyaeva L.E. 2022. Colour meaning in English literary pieces. *RUDN Journal of Language Studies, Semiotics, and Semantics,* 13(1): 201-212.

Koutsompou, V.E. 2016. The child and the fairy tale: the psychological perspective of children's literature. *International Journal of Languages, Literature, and Linguistics,* 2(4): 213-218.

Levinson, J. 2022. Why diversity in children's media is so important. [Online]. from https://www.psychologyinaction.org/psychology-in-action1/2020/3/5/why-diversity-in-childrens-media-is-so-important (16 February 2022).

Nanda, S.N. 2014. The portrayal of women in the fairy tales. *The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention,* 1(4): 246–250.

Rahman, F. 2017. The revival of local fairy tales for children education. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies,* 7(5): 336-344.

Reichertz, R. 1997. *The making of Alice books: uses of earlier children's literature*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Rogers, O. 2021. Why representation matters in kids' media [Blog Post]. [Online].https://www.commonsensemedia.org/kidsaction/blog/whyrepresentation-matters-in-kids-media# (16 February 2022).

Talmon, R.J. 2010. *Plethora and void: the absent mother in fairy tales*. Alliant International University: San Francisco Bay.

Taylor, F. 2003. Content analysis and gender stereotypes in children's books. *American Sociological Association*, 31(3): 300-311.

Teverson, A. 2013. *Fairy tale*. London: Routledge.

Tschida, C.M., Ryan, C.L. and Ticknor, A.S. 2014. Building on windows and mirrors: encouraging the disruption of "Single Stories" through children's literature. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 40(1): 28-39.

Van Leeuwen, T. 2005. *Introducing social semiotics*. London: Psychology Press.