

Deconstructing a Disempowering Normative Identity: Angela Carter's Adaptations of the Ashputtle Story

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Abstract. Historically speaking, fairy tales have been powerful instruments in the education of children and in the transmission of moral standards from one generation to the next, from the dominant class to less powerful groups. As they make certain ways of life or ideals appear attractive and others repellent, fairy tales also contribute to form normative identities in their young readers. A normative identity combines a descriptive account of who one is with a normative account of what one ought to do. Such identities can be empowering or disempowering. Fairy tales can be seen as using a technique of narrative persuasion to impose normative identities on their audiences, making certain ideals and ways of life appear natural and self-evident. To deconstruct a disempowering normative identity imposed by a fairy tale involves separating its descriptive and normative components and making vivid the problematic aspects of the norms, values, and ideals involved. In this article, we analyse Angela Carter's deconstruction of a disempowering normative identity imposed on women by the Ashputtle fairy tale, as told by the Grimm brothers. In our analysis, based on close reading and philosophical criticism, we reveal how Carter herself makes use of the fairy-tale technique of narrative persuasion in her deconstructive work, vividly bringing out certain appalling consequences of the ideals of submission and self-sacrifice implied by the Grimm version of the Ashputtle story, thereby also subverting that version.

Keywords: Angela Carter, Ashputtle, fairy tales, close reading, analytic moral philosophy, normative identity, deconstruction, narrative persuasion

Introduction: The significance of fairy tales

Fairy tales offer a unique opportunity to study the norms, values, and expectations of communities. Historically speaking, they have been powerful instruments in the education of children and in the transmission of moral standards from one generation to the next, from the dominant class to less powerful groups. It has been argued that “fairy tales operate ideologically to indoctrinate children so that they will conform to dominant social standards that are not

necessarily established in their behalf" (Zipes 2006: 34). Even political systems which, like that of the former Soviet Union, dismiss fairy tales as representing an "unhealthy heritage of the past", can come to see the instrumental value of at least some of them, as when Alexander Pushkin's fairy tales "were declared to convey the ideals of the poor, oppressed classes and were thus acceptable for the education of young Soviet citizens" (Nikolajeva 2002: 172).

Whenever they are remembered, retold, and reconstructed fairy tales provide us with insights into the hopes and fears, expectations and conflicts of the cultures and communities that produced them. Fairy tales and the adaptations that they undergo over time deserve the attention of not only literary scholars but also historians, philosophers, and sociologists as they speak to us "about their tellers, audiences, contexts of performance, and sociocultural backgrounds" (Greenhill and Matrix 2010: 1). Among other things, fairy tales inform us about the construction of gender roles and social expectations on men and women and their interactions with each other. It has been pointed out that "fairy tales are unique parables of feminine socialization and graphic examples of a cultural consciousness that predates the emergence of women into their full stature as persons" (Kolbenschlag 1981: 3).

In this essay, we intend to analyse Angela Carter's deconstruction of the Ashputtles fairy tale. Methodologically speaking, our analysis will combine close reading with tools provided by analytic moral philosophy. Close reading, being the "mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings" (Brummett 2010: 9) and conducted as "a technically informed, fine-grained analysis of some piece of writing, usually in connection with some broader question of interest" (Smith 2016: 58), is a natural choice not only when studying literature, but also when studying literary criticism. As Carter's deconstruction of the Ashputtles fairy tale contains a moral argument regarding the view of women implied by that fairy tale, we have found it useful to combine close reading of her text with the kind of analysis associated with analytical moral philosophy, involving "the critical evaluation of assumptions and argument" as well as "the clarification of concepts which have a key role in the notions subjected to critical evaluation" (Raphael 1994: 7). As a result of combining close reading with philosophical analysis in this manner, we have been able to relate Carter's argument to the theoretically significant concept of normative identity. We believe that our study and the methods it relies on can be useful not only to literary studies in general, but also in particular to that part of women's studies or gender studies which focuses on the representation of women in literature.

Normative identity, narrative persuasion, and Angela Carter's deconstruction of Ashputtle

In her short story "Ashputtle or The Mother's Ghost", Angela Carter retells the story of Ashputtle or Cinderella, made famous by the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, in three different adaptations. These adaptations are not just neutral renderings of an older original but should rather be understood as setting up "an ironic, postmodern, and feminist relationship with the 'Cinderella' folktale or fairy tale" (Bacchilega 2013: 32).

We would like to extend this claim by arguing that Carter is engaged in a process of *subverting a disempowering normative identity imposed on women* by the Grimm version of the Ashputtle fairy tale. By the term "normative identity" we mean a conception of a person that combines a descriptive account of who she *is* with a normative idea about how she *ought* to act. According to the Grimm version of the Ashputtle fairy tale, being a woman (descriptive component) involves being expected to conform to an ideal of self-sacrifice and submission (normative component). For a woman who has accepted such a normative identity for herself, it would be impossible or at least very difficult to detach herself from it, since its norms would be an integrated part of her very self-conception and she would not be able to evaluate them critically from an independent and detached point of view. To change the contents of a person's normative identity, one must begin by deconstructing it. This involves separating its normative components from its descriptive components, showing to the person who has the identity in question that she can be who she is without having to adhere to these particular norms, ideals or values. It is such a deconstruction of a particular normative identity imposed on women that takes place in Angela Carter's three adaptations of the Grimm version of the Ashputtle fairy tale.

Now, it has been argued that Carter's retelling of the Ashputtle story can be seen as an example of an "early feminist criticism of fairy tales", being "principally concerned with the genre's representation of females and the effects of these representations on the gender identity and behavior of children in particular" (Haase 2000: 16). However, her aim is not to establish a causal hypothesis about how fairy tales actually make women perceive themselves. Instead Carter is focusing on the fairy tale itself with its implicit normative message. In our terminology, what she wants to highlight is that the Ashputtle story offers girls and young women a normative identity involving self-sacrifice and submission. It is this normative identity that she wants to deconstruct and subvert.

We are not arguing that all normative identities are oppressive and in need of deconstruction. To construct a normative identity for oneself may be a way of creating meaning in one's life – we identify with some cause that we perceive as imbued with value (be it a moral, religious, aesthetic, or any other kind of value) and derive direction and purpose in our lives from trying to realise or contribute to that cause (Bauhn 2017: 15–19). Here, however, Angela Carter takes issue with a normative identity that external agents or structures (patriarchal tradition, traditional morality, social conventions) try to *impose* on women. The normative identity implied in the Grimm version of the Ashputtles fairy tale certainly provides women with a purpose in their lives, but this purpose is disempowering rather than empowering, instrumentalising women's lives rather than emancipating them.

That a normative identity is imposed on women does not mean that women are only its passive victims. Women can also be the agents of such an imposition. Carter uses the Ashputtles story to show that mothers may well actively take part in conveying to their daughters a destructive and diminishing view of themselves. It has been noted that “Carter's view of women was never overly idealistic”, and “her reclamation of the position of female storyteller does not lead to her exoneration of the female gender from complicity with – and even an active perpetuation of – the circumstances of its own oppression” (Gamble 2008: 27).

Literature can impose normative identities on women by exposing them to a kind of *narrative persuasion* with the object of having them look for meaning in self-sacrifice and submission. It should be noted that the fact that the contents of a narrative is fictive (as in the case of the Ashputtles story) does not mean that it cannot be effective as persuasion – on the contrary, a narrative may escape careful scrutiny just because it is thought of as a piece of harmless fiction (Green and Brock 2013: 329). However, we should also note that Carter herself adopts narrative persuasion as a technique to deconstruct the normative identity suggested by the Ashputtles fairy tale. By vividly representing the cruelty implied by that normative identity, she makes it appear as evil rather than good, as something for women to avoid and reject rather than something to embrace and adopt for themselves. Hence, the narrative persuasion of the Grimm version of the Ashputtles fairy tale is countered by the narrative persuasion of Carter's adaptations of that same fairy tale.

The retelling performed by Carter is “activist in its motivations” (Bacchilega 2013: 35), aiming to confront a disempowering normative identity imposed on women. Carter's retelling of the Ashputtles story aligns itself with the goal once envisaged by Carolyn Heilbrun, that “myth, tale, and tragedy must be transformed by bold acts of reinterpretation in order to enter the experience

of the emerging female self” (Heilbrun 1979: 150). At the same time, Carter’s subversive retelling of the Ashputtle story itself remains within the genre of fairy tales. She is not writing a political manifesto or making a sociological analysis; instead she is trying to utilise the persuasive and imaginative powers inherent in fairy tales to make her readers see both the message of the Grimm version and how that message can be criticised.

It could also be argued that Carter, by questioning the normative identity propagated for women in the Grimm version, makes room for an earlier and less submissive Ashputtle. In this sense, her project can be seen as not only *deconstructive*, but also as *reconstructive*. The Grimm brothers borrowed the submissive Cinderella character, who is prepared to accept any humiliation for the sake of finally being allowed to marry a prince, from the seventeenth century French writer Charles Perrault. Perrault himself, however, modified an earlier Cinderella character that was anything but submissive and docile. This early Cinderella “does not turn her cheek but rebels and struggles to offset her disadvantages” and in one version (from 1634) “the young protagonist does not hesitate to kill a stepmother and embarrass her father to get her way” (Zipes 2006: 46).

Carter’s retelling of the Ashputtle fairy tale can be seen as an example of how a classical text can be approached from a feminist perspective that “takes into account the broader cultural context of the literary work, relating it to ways of thinking about and of being in the world, linking the reading of literature to life as it is lived”, including “how consciousness is shaped, the imagination curtailed and the real constructed” (Plate 2011: 46). This shaping of consciousness is a central part of what we here have called normative identity. Carter’s adaptations also constitute an example of what Adrienne Rich called “re-vision”, that is, “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction”, motivated by a need and desire to know and understand oneself and one’s context: “Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (Rich 1972: 18). This looking for self-knowledge can also be seen as a quest for a liberating normative identity, one that combines being a woman with being an agent of one’s own destiny, with autonomy and rights.

Carter’s first adaptation

The first of Carter’s adaptations is called “The Mutilated Girls”. Carter begins by noting some unsatisfying aspects of the original version provided by the

Grimm brothers. The original version leaves many things unsaid and un-commented. Carter notes that the Grimm version is a typical fairy tale, characterised by “bare necessity”. As such, it does not contain any other information than is necessary to move the narrative forward. As Carter observes, the fairy tale quickly moves on from one event to the next, with just an “and then” in between. It does not occupy itself with the “emotional and technical complexity of bourgeois realism” (Carter 1995: 392). Now, Carter herself says that she does not intend to provide the story of Ashputtle with any such realist complexities. However, from the limited information given by the Grimm brothers, she tries to place the Ashputtle story in a gendered context of interpretation. Such a reading will focus on the significance of marriage for women’s social status, and on the sacrifices women are prepared to make for the sake of a socially prestigious marriage.

In Carter’s version, the Ashputtle story is basically a story about women. Women are subjects and men are the objects of their goals. This does not mean that men are unimportant. It is by capturing a socially respectable man in marriage that a woman secures her position in society, and if she fails to capture such a man or if she loses him, her position is weak. (This is the kind of female self-perception that has become known as the “Cinderella Complex”, according to which women are being repressed by having a “deep wish to be taken care of by others” instilled in them. Having come to doubt their own capacity for successful agency, they are reduced to “waiting for something external to change their lives” (Dowling 1981: 21).)

Ashputtle’s mother loses her connection to Ashputtle’s father by dying and so becomes unable to protect her daughter. By marrying Ashputtle’s father, on the other hand, the stepmother gains power for herself and her daughters, enabling them to dominate and bully Ashputtle. The marriage between Ashputtle’s father and the stepmother reduces Ashputtle’s status from that of a family member to that of a servant. This will in turn prevent her from competing on equal terms with her stepsisters when it comes to finding a suitable husband. However, it also points to a genderised normative identity inherent in many fairy tales, according to which the girl should prepare herself to live for another: “This role will school her in self-forgetfulness, service and sacrifice, in nurturing rather than initiating behaviors. Above all, it will teach her to ‘sleep’ – to wait, forever if necessary, for the expected *other* who will make her life meaningful and fulfilled” (Kolbensschlag 1981: 10).

Marriage is the key ingredient in the Ashputtle story. Marriage gives the stepmother control over Ashputtle and enables her to promote her daughters’ interests. And the prime interest of these daughters, at least as the stepmother sees it, is to be married to men who can secure their social status. Although the

stepmother may appear as a powerful matriarch here, we should note that her power is exercised within a framework of patriarchal norms and values and has as its main purpose to secure status for her daughters by utilising rather than by subverting this framework.

The father is described by Carter as “absent” in the sense that he is at most a background character. We are not told anything about what he wants for himself, for Ashputtle, or for his new wife and her daughters. However, his absence does not make him unimportant, since Ashputtle’s stepmother and her daughters would not have had any power over Ashputtle if it had not been for her father having married the stepmother. Ashputtle’s father is also a “mystery”, according to Carter, since he seems to accept the humiliation of Ashputtle without the slightest protest. What kind of father would accept that his own daughter is “soiled with kitchen refuse and filthy from her ashy bed and always hard at work”? (Carter 1995: 391)

Still, when the father is going for a business trip, he asks what presents *his three girls* would want him to bring back to them. So he does recognise both Ashputtle and her two stepsisters as his daughters, on equal terms. Carter speculates that one reason for this could be that they all are in fact his daughters, that is, that the father has been intimate with Ashputtle’s stepmother when he was still married to her mother. This interpretation, however, goes against the Brothers Grimm version in which it is stated that the stepmother, when she married Ashputtle’s father, “already had two daughters from her first husband” (Grimm and Grimm 2014: 69).

Another interpretation (not discussed by Carter) would be that Ashputtle’s father is indeed absent also in the sense that he devotes himself completely to his professional life and refuses to attend to what goes on in his home. This understanding of his absence would also provide a gendered reading of the Ashputtle story. Men, acting in accordance with a normative identity of their own, are expected to care for money and career, while leaving it to their women to take care of domestic duties and running the household. Ashputtle’s father turns a blind eye to Ashputtle’s misery simply because his attention is directed to another aspect of the competition for social status, that is, making money.

Carter believes that the hostility of Ashputtle’s stepmother could be explained by Ashputtle’s father being the biological father of her two daughters. As she had been denied and rejected while Ashputtle’s mother lived, she will now deny and reject Ashputtle. But if we accept Carter’s account of how the women of the Ashputtle story are driven by the competition for status through marriage, this would in fact be sufficient to explain the jealousy and hostility that her stepmother and stepsisters show Ashputtle. A mother’s first duty to her daughter, according to the normative identity suggested by the Grimm version

of the fairy tale, would then be to see to it that the daughter gets married to a man with status, and any other young woman who gets in the way will be treated with hostility.

This maternal duty is so strong in the Ashputtle story that it defeats even death. Ashputtle's mother acts from beyond the grave, appearing in the form of turtle doves that intervene to make sure that Ashputtle can come to the king's ball in a beautiful dress and golden shoes, attracting the attention of the king's son, the prince. Here the story could have ended, if it had not been for the need for a "ritual humiliation of the other woman and the mutilation of her daughters" (Carter 1995: 393). The story is not just about Ashputtle finding happiness for herself after years of oppression. It is just as much about the outcome of a long and merciless fight between two groups of women. On the one hand there is the dead mother and Ashputtle. On the other hand there is the stepmother and her two daughters.

Here one could add to Carter's interpretation of the Ashputtle story and argue that it is indeed a war narrative. And like all war narratives it must end with the defeat of one party. And, just as in some ancient tragedies, the very effort to avoid an undesirable outcome is what actually brings about that outcome. This is what the central part of the Ashputtle story, the one about the lost shoe, is all about. As she leaves the dance with the prince, Ashputtle loses one of her golden shoes – a shoe that is uniquely fit for her foot. The prince searches for a woman whose foot fits the shoe. The stepmother, who, as Carter points out, "would do anything to catch him" (Carter 1995: 393), chops off her elder daughter's big toe and the younger daughter's heel to make their feet fit the shoe.

Here Carter makes us stop to fill in what is missing in the story. The Brothers Grimm simply skips over what should have been a very dramatic part of their story. Carter invites us to try to imagine the scene in which the stepmother shows the knife to her daughter, making clear her intentions. Mocking gender stereotypes about female sensitivity and male toughness, she makes us visualise the daughter being "as distraught as if she had not been a girl but a boy and the old woman was after a more essential portion than a toe" (Carter 1995: 393). This passage also provides another image of mutilation: castration. Just as castration puts an end to procreation, the mutilation of the daughters' feet, in spite of being carried out for the sake of securing an attractive marriage, actually destroys the girls' chances of any marriage (given prevailing ideals of bodily beauty).

If we previously had reason to wonder about Ashputtle's father who did not seem to mind his daughter being ill-treated, we must now wonder about the woman who in the story is called the step-mother, but who is in fact the "natural"

mother of the girls that she is now about to mutilate. And what about the scene in which Ashputtle finally puts her foot into the shoe, that is now soiled by her stepsisters' blood? Carter has the word "squelch" describe the sound of the foot as it is pressed into the bloody shoe. She underlines the ghastliness of the scene by having a turtle dove – Ashputtle's dead mother – exclaiming "Her foot fits the shoe like a corpse fit the coffin!" (Carter 1995: 394). The reader is made uneasy by Carter's "pairing of death/violence and motherly love" and by a narrative in which "[m]otherly caretaking is conflated with the terms 'corpse' and 'coffin'" (Ryan-Sautour 2011: 39). At a metaphorical level, this is also a description of the normative identity imposed on women in a society preoccupied with marriage as a way of achieving status. They are just bodies to be fitted into a socially approved form.

This is what mothers do to their daughters. This is the "[m]other love, which winds about these daughters like a shroud" (Carter 1995: 393). It is also a kind of maternal insanity. Carter notes how the turtle dove sings "while the other mad mother stood impotently by" (Carter 1995: 394). Both mothers are hence considered to be insane. They are mothers who mutilate their daughters, mothers who force their daughters to put their feet in blood-soaked shoes just for the sake of having them married off to some "respectable" man. Here the Ashputtle fairy tale "becomes an occasion to reflect on ruthless mothers shaping generations of Cinderellas to fulfill their own ambitions" as "it raises the issue of intergenerational transmission and the reproduction of behavioral patterns from mothers to daughters" (Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère 2016: 169). In other words, it reveals a normative identity imposed on young women and exposes it to moral criticism by pointing to its brutal consequences.

Carter's second adaptation

In her second adaptation of the Ashputtle story, called "The Burned Child", Angela Carter points to another terrifying aspect of motherly love. Here the mother reduces herself to the role of a tool, serving her daughter in her pursuit of a good marriage. But the mother also creates feelings of guilt in her daughter. In this story, the dead mother (who does not look down from heaven but looks up "through the earth" (Carter 1995: 395)) appears in various animal disguises to help Ashputtle, but also to remind her about the sacrifices that the mother has accepted for herself. The living daughter is hence tied to the dead mother in a web of expectations and obligations – that is, in a normative identity. This reminds us of Carter's metaphor, quoted above, about "[m]other love, which winds about these daughters like a shroud".

The dead mother appears as a cow, feeding Ashputtle with milk so that “she grew fat, she grew breasts, she grew up” (Carter 1995: 395). Ashputtle washes herself in the milk from the cow and gets rid of the scars she got from sleeping among hot ashes, but then the cow tells her to find milk for herself in the future: “You’ve milked me dry” (Carter 1995: 395). The mother then appears as a cat, combing Ashputtle’s hair and losing its claws in the process: “You’ve maimed me” (Carter 1995: 395). Finally, the mother appears as a bird, pouring its blood over Ashputtle, making her a red silk dress, after which the bird exclaims: “Make your own dress next time ... I’m through with that bloody business” (Carter 1995: 396). As Ashputtle gets her prince, the dead mother concludes: “Now I can go to sleep ... Now everything is all right” (Carter 1995: 396).

This is a story which brings out the sacrifices expected of mothers, but also of how mothers tie their daughters to them by making them feel the extent of these sacrifices. One can imagine that the daughters are expected to be more willing to accept their own sacrifices (like having a toe or a part of the heel chopped off), when they realise what their mothers have forced themselves to endure for their sake. At a more general level, the second adaptation also points to the narrative persuasion of the fairy tale itself – how it appeals to girls’ or young women’s willingness to identify with Ashputtle and so accept a normative identity of submission and self-sacrifice for themselves.

Carter’s third adaptation

In Carter’s third adaptation of the Ashputtle story, called “Travelling Clothes”, Ashputtle once again is scarred, but not from sleeping in the hot ashes. Instead it is the stepmother who burns her face with a red-hot poker. And this time Ashputtle’s dead mother appears in person, not in the disguise of animals. She kisses Ashputtle and so removes the scar from her face. She gives Ashputtle a red dress, telling her that she herself had it when she was Ashputtle’s age.

So far this seems a rather straightforward tale of the comforting love of a mother. But then the story immediately turns into something more sinister and morbid. The mother takes out worms from her eyesockets, turning them into jewels for her daughter. The reference to “eyesockets” gives us the image of a decayed corpse or even a skeleton. The mother appears not in the shape of a living woman, but shows her body as it is after being a long time in her grave. She asks Ashputtle to join her in her coffin, telling the reluctant girl that this is what *she* did when *her* mother called her to her grave (Carter 1995: 396). As Ashputtle steps into the coffin, it turns into a coach and horses and her mother tells her to go and seek her fortune.

Three things are worth noticing here. First, we are made to understand that the way to happiness for a woman goes through her giving up her life, “stepping into the coffin”, so to speak. What a woman may want for herself does not matter. Marriage, and all the sacrifices that come with it, are the coffin here. This is what women will have to deal with, at least as long as they are trapped in an idea of happiness that focuses on marriage and social status. The coffin is, in fact, the symbolic representation of the normative identity imposed on women in the Grimm version of the Ashputtle fairy tale.

Second, we have the connection between motherly love and the submission of daughters, which Carter has already pointed to in her earlier adaptations. Mothers teach their daughters that they have to give themselves up in order to find happiness. It is a lesson passed on from one generation of women to the next. Whether it involves the mutilation of the body or other ways of “stepping into the coffin”, the love of a mother for a daughter is supposed to involve the infliction of pain and restrictions. Here one is reminded of Simone de Beauvoir’s observation that in a society governed by patriarchal norms and values, mothers’ views of their daughters tend to be ambiguous and conflicted: “[F]or the mother, the daughter is both her double and an other, the mother cherishes her and at the same time is hostile to her; she imposes her own destiny on her child: it is a way to proudly claim her own femininity and also to take revenge on it” (de Beauvoir 2009: 306).

Third, the connection between love and death is once again underlined here. Ashputtle’s mother brings love from her grave and she invites Ashputtle to join her in her coffin. Once again we face that intimidating “[m]other love, which winds about these daughters like a shroud”.

At a more general level, one can here detect a criticism of the Christian ideal of humility and sacrifice, according to which the road to salvation goes through self-denial, meekness, acceptance of victimhood, and a constant turning of the other cheek in the face of brutality and oppression. It has also been noted that “Carter habitually associated the prestige and glamour of passivity with the cult of Christianity and Father Gods in general” (Sage 1998: 56).

Conclusion

In Angela Carter’s adaptations of the Ashputtle story women are constrained by having a normative identity imposed on them, according to which their overarching purpose in life should be to get married. To achieve this aim, they should be prepared to sacrifice themselves and their daughters, submitting themselves to any strategy, no matter how harmful to their well-being, that is needed to secure their position as someone’s wife. While the Brothers Grimm have their

story culminate in the scene in which Ashputtle's foot fits the shoe that the prince asks her to try on, Carter expands this idea of fittingness into something much larger. It becomes an image of the oppression that women subject themselves and their daughters to for the sake of being accepted in a marriage. And marriage itself becomes a process of "fitting in", as a woman may acquire social status and security for herself only by being "fit" for a suitable marriage. Love itself becomes something morally ambiguous, to say the least, when it involves mothers doing anything to get their daughters married, including physically harming them.

Carter makes a strong point in connecting all these exercises in female adaptation to death. It is the death of the woman as an independent agent with a life and a set of aspirations of her own. As long as women accept being trapped in a web of conventions that tell them that the only thing that matters is for them to get married, then they cannot have a life that is truly their own. They will all be forced down in the "coffin" of their mothers and other women of previous generations. Highlighting these uncomfortable aspects of the Ashputtle fairy tale in her three adaptations, Carter appropriates for herself the method of narrative persuasion inherent in that story and uses it to raise the awareness of contemporary readers regarding a disempowering normative identity that has been imposed on women – and not only on the fictive women of the fairy tale, but also on existing women of past and present times. In so doing, she delivers a powerful moral argument that is both about the limiting social conditions under which many women have lived and still live and about the normative identities implied by the literature that we consume.

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