Childhood is a strange world that exists completely in its own realm. Monsters and magic run amok through day and night. Children don’t discriminate between the fallacy and fantasy they are handed. Instead, they absorb everything equally, which means that they are especially vulnerable to learning mass amounts of information that affect them for their entire lives. It is at these tender times that children are first introduced to some of the constrictions of society, like gender. These lessons are delivered from the seemingly most innocent places: fairy tales. They confine children to a black and white definition of who they can be—and who they should judge others to be. In many cases, these gender archetypes are detrimental to children’s self-esteem (Kuykendal and Sturm 39). Stories like the Grimm brothers’ “Snow White” teach children these harmful gender roles, and later, these gender roles have devastating effects on their self-image.

Gender is defined as “the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women” (“What do we mean”). In other words, gender is what society deems how men and women (or girls and boys) should behave. This is purely a social construct; children are not born knowing their place in society. According to Leslee Kuykendal and Brian Sturm, “the cultural norms” that are represented in fairy tales play a key role in the “socialization process” of the children who are expose to them (38). This simply means that fairy tales are a source from which children learn about society’s constructs. Of course, within these constructs lies gender, one of the most prominent and clearly defined set of rules in modern day society (Kuykendal and Sturm 38). Boys must not cry, girls must be
sweet, and so on and so forth. These strict standards are crucial to the shaping of a child’s self-image; gender helps them understand not only themselves, but “also the behavior of others” (Kuykendal and Sturm 38).

Of course, no fairy tale would be interesting if it was purely a manual on how women and men should and should not behave. Instead, gender roles in fairy tales are “oversimplified” and often go unnoticed (Kuykendal and Sturm 39). The Grimm brothers’ “Snow White” is riddled with gender stereotypes. One of the most paramount examples is the character of Snow White herself. She is beautiful—by the tender age of seven, she becomes not only “as beautiful as the bright day” but also the “fairest of them all” (Grimm 83). However, this seems to be one of her only redeeming qualities. Snow White is never described as smart or quick witted in the story; in fact, she is almost singularly called “beautiful” throughout the entire piece (Grimm 83, 85, 88, 89).

Though the tale bears her name, Snow does not do much besides be beautiful. After pleading with the huntsman to be let free into the forest, Snow White does not attempt to fight her way back to the castle or even adapt to her surroundings and hide; instead, she runs (Grimm 84). She runs without direction and “as far as her legs could carry her” to a little cottage (Grimm 84). There is no cunning here, no great mystery or action. Snow White is portrayed as running around like a chicken with her head cut off. And upon approaching the cottage, Snow White does not think twice: “… she saw a little cottage and went inside to rest” (Grimm 84). It does not seem to occur to her that although there are obvious signs of inhabitants (like food on the table) that she should at least wait until the rightful residents return before she barges in (Grimm 84).

When the seven little men who own the place do arrive, the princess relays her story to them. They tell her that she may stay if she does their housework: cooking, cleaning, sewing,
knitting, and the like (Grimm 85). Snow White jumps at this opportunity “with pleasure” (Grimm 85). She falls into her role as housewife without any complaints whatsoever. She does not try to leave the dwarfs’ house or steel herself against the wicked queen—she simply tidies up during the day and has dinner ready for her seven men when they return home (Grimm 85).

Perhaps the dwarfs see that Snow White does not possessed great keenness, for they warn her: “Beware of your stepmother. She’ll know soon enough that you’re here. Don’t let anyone in the house.” (Grimm 85). However, the princess does exactly this—on three separate occasions. Granted, Snow White could not possibly know that her stepmother would appear as a kindly old woman. However, after the first incident where Snow caves almost instantly to kindly crone peddling laces and thusly is tied so tightly she nearly suffocates, one would think Snow would learn better than to talk to strangers (Grimm 86).

She does not. She lets the old woman into the cottage a second time, this time for a comb that poisons her while it is in her hair (Grimm 87). After both consecutive events, the dwarfs warn her to keep away from strangers yet again. The third time around, Snow White is wise enough not to allow the woman into the cottage—instead, she finds she cannot resist temptation for a gorgeous bicolored apple and reaches out the window to take half of it, her fatal mistake (Grimm 88). In each incident, Snow White falls victim to her curiosity and naked desire for the “feminine” items she is presented with—the stay laces, the poisoned comb, and the poisoned apple which represent beauty and culinary arts, respectively (Gilbert and Gubar 294). The image that is painted of Snow White is, simply put, beautiful and nothing else. She is brainlessly obedient to anyone’s command, is a good girl, and is absolutely ready to assume her role as the traditional housewife.
On the other hand, her step-mother is portrayed as her polar opposite: evil, vain, and cruel. The queen is only referred to as beautiful once, and, even then, the adjective is followed by “but proud and arrogant, and could not bear being second to anyone in beauty” (Grimm 83). Her beauty is simply a characteristic, but seemingly her most important asset. “When she stood in front of [her magic mirror] and looked at herself, she would say: ‘Mirror, mirror, on the wall, / Who’s the fairest one of all?’” (Grimm 83). This seems to imply that the queen has a routine of standing in front of her mirror very often—so often that she has a scripted line to chant each time. This highlights her narcissism, showing the audience that one who feels the need to look at herself and admire her own beauty should be held in a negative light. Indeed, we most often think of the evil queen as self-absorbed in her quest for Snow’s life (Gilbert and Gubar 292).

Unlike her step-daughter, the queen is very crafty. She first devises a plan to kill Snow White by having a huntsman take her to the woods and do it; he promptly obeys, only to find himself unable to kill the child and, instead, sets her free (Grimm 84). When the queen finally becomes wise to this debacle, she grows furious and thinks “long and hard” about what she can do to kill Snow White (Grimm 86). It is noted that until the queen becomes fairest in the land once more, she will live in a constant state of gnawing envy (Grimm 86). So, she devises a plan to show up and kill Snow White in person, using witchcraft to disguise herself as an ugly old woman selling various wares to the innocent Snow White (Grimm 86). This is a grim message to women who read this story: A woman who is smart is not pretty, and if a woman thinks she is pretty, she is vain. Gilbert and Gubar famously call this the “monster woman”—a woman who is powerful (291). It is clear that the story is saying it is undesirable for a woman to be powerful, smart, and beautiful.
The men in this story also represent some powerful stereotypes. The seven dwarfs are all men who, upon seeing Snow White, can only comment upon her beauty. In fact, all in agreement that they are “delighted to see her,” they refuse to wake her even though she has broken into their house and is sleeping in one of their beds (Grimm 85). As mentioned before, they offer Snow White a housekeeping job in order for her to stay—and if she complies with their request, they will give her “everything [she] needs” (Grimm 85). They are typical working men. They spend their days working—in this case, mining for gold and other minerals—and when they come home in the evening “dinner had to be ready for them” (Grimm 85). They function to provide for and to protect Snow White, and they must save her life twice—one by unlacing her bodice the witch has pulled it too tight, and a second time by removing the poison comb from her hair (Grimm 86, 87).

When finally Snow White “dies” from the poisoned apple, the men cannot bear to bury her (Grimm 88). Instead, they encase her in a glass coffin and place it on a mountain top, with one dwarf always watching over her (Grimm 89). Even in death, Snow White’s beauty is too profound for it to be “thrown away”—instead, it is being showcased, and then men are once again functioning as her protectors. Suddenly, a prince comes along, and just happens to stay with the dwarfs; he spots Snow White’s coffin and is, like the dwarfs, utterly captivated by her looks (Grimm 89). He goes on to quite literally objectify Snow by saying: “I will give you whatever you want for it” (Grimm 89). “It” is the coffin that contains Snow White. The prince does not bother to recognize the fact that he is asking the men to give up the girl’s body simply because he thinks it is beautiful. When they balk, he persists: “Make me a present of it, for I can’t live without seeing Snow White” (Grimm 89). Again, he calls Snow an “it,” only noting that the “it” is actually a woman when he mentions he would not be able to live without seeing
her. Since he is asking for the dwarfs to give him the casket, it is understood that Snow White is now nothing but property to be bartered over.

These men create an archetype which is common in society; a working man, who provides for his woman. He is the protector of his woman, and he very often needs to save her. As well, she is indeed his—his object to stare at, his object to claim as his own. She is not autonomous, but simply a part of the greater whole—him. The tale shows that these should be regarded as positive qualities for a man to possess since all of the male characters are heroes, saving Snow from death—and heroes are, in layman’s terms, the good guys.

This tale shows children that women should ideally be seen and not heard; they are pretty pictures meant for housekeeping only. And men, of course, are their protectors, who support the household by working and expect obedience out of their foppish girls. However, women who recognize their own beauty or take active, cunning roles in their own destiny are ugly and evil. Studies have shown that tales like “Snow White” do make impressions upon children’s self-image.

Evangelia Moula, a teacher in secondary education, and Mary Kabouropoulou, a department member of primary education at the University of Aegean, conducted an experiment with art, fairy tales, and school children. They broached the topic of gender stereotypes with students by showing the children images of women looking into mirrors, like in the famous tale of “Snow White” (Moula and Kabouropoulou 292, 293). It is widely known that a woman in front of a mirror is “the norm of female narcissism” (Moula and Kabouropoulou 299). When asked why women “look at the mirror and take care of themselves,” 30% of children responded that it was simply “natural to them,” 30% said it was “because beauty is a woman’s power” and an overwhelming 40% claimed that women “need beauty in order to make their men like them”
The children saw women as naturally vain, and their vanity was solely to impress men (Moula and Kabouropoulou 303).

More frightening stereotypes emerged after the discussion was diverted specifically to the mirror that plays an important role in “Snow White.” Females admitted that a boy’s opinion of their beauty mattered much more than a fellow girl’s opinion (Moula and Kabouropoulou 312). It was also noted that boys like “sexy and… silly girls” (Moula and Kabouropoulou 312). The males in the study concluded by an overwhelming majority—90%—that they noted beauty in a woman, rather than intelligence. These are the classic stereotypes that are reinforced in “Snow White”: women should be pretty objects of desire for men, who are there for the only purpose of desiring them. This toxic conclusion that women are practically sex dolls is a harmful message to send to children, and certainly would make a child question her own potential to achieve in life (Kuykendal and Sturm 39).

Children do not have the worldly knowledge that adults do. They are young and impressionable, open to any and all ideas they receive. They do not know that the story they are being told in which a princess happily cleans, waiting for her prince to come, is teaching them things that will harm them later in life. Indeed, children cannot distinguish the ideals that will boost their confidence from ones that will lead them to later question their abilities to function outside of societal norms. They absorb without discrimination the stereotypes which works like the Grimm brother’s “Snow White” showcase in Technicolor glory: beautiful, passive women who care for their protecting, supporting men. A woman who falls out of these bounds is a wicked step-mother, evil and old, cunning but vain for seeing her own worth. Gender stereotypes like these do play a role in how people interact with one another later in life—girls think that they must please men, and men think that girls exist to please them. While these tales are
certainly heartwarming in the way folk tales are, perhaps they should be rewritten: In the future, they should not perpetuate such damaging gender stereotypes.

Works Cited


"What Do We Mean by "sex" and "gender"?" *WHO*. World Health Organization. Web. 23 Nov. 2014.