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Once Upon a Time: Rewriting Transformation, Identity, and Resistance in Selected Fairy Tales and Realist Literature Works

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***Abstract*—Fairy tales have always promised transformation—rags to riches, beast to prince, struggle to reward. But beneath their well-worn endings lie contradictions, moments of quiet defiance where characters push against the boundaries of their worlds. *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* seem to celebrate patience and virtue, yet their symbols—the guiding birds, the enchanted rose—hint at something more complex: the possibility of choice, of agency even in the face of restriction. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) takes this tension further, stepping beyond the familiar comfort of fairy-tale resolutions. Edna Pontellier's story does not offer the promise of "happily ever after" but instead lingers in uncertainty, resisting the closure that so often defines traditional narratives. Similarly, Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) presents Marian Forrester as a woman who does not conform to romanticized ideals, challenging the expectations placed upon her. This study explores how these texts reflect both conformity and the desire for reinvention, drawing on postmodern critiques such as Jean-François Lyotard's challenge to grand narratives. Through the lens of transformation and identity, these stories remind us that endings are rarely neat, that narratives—like the people who tell and live them—are always shifting, always searching for something more.**

***Index Terms*—fairy tales, realism, identity, transformation, narrative instability**

I. Introduction

In the rich tradition of storytelling, the opening phrase "once upon a time" conjures timeless imagery of romantic resolution, domestic tranquility, and idealized harmony. Classic fairy tales such as *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* have long perpetuated cultural expectations concerning gender roles, marriage, and personal success, often reinforcing traditional ideals. However, beneath their tempting charm lies a more subtle landscape—one filled with subtle gestures of resistance and possibilities for reinterpretation. Scholars such as Warner (1995) have extensively examined how fairy tales simultaneously affirm and subtly critique societal norms, offering readers spaces for imaginative resistance and reinterpretation.

Victorian adaptations of fairy tales particularly exemplify this delicate balance. Farr (2019) explores how popular Victorian periodicals strategically recast these tales, embedding subtle critiques of marriage, inheritance, and women's domestic responsibilities within their narratives. Farr describes these adaptations as "seductive narratives" that simultaneously reinforce and quietly subvert patriarchal ideals by promoting alternative perspectives on marriage, companionship, and female agency (Farr, 2019, p. 12). Fairy tales thus functioned not only as vehicles of cultural conformity, but also as subtle expressions of resistance and feminist critique.

Similarly, feminist realist literature emerging around the turn of the 20th century offers a critical viewpoint on these evolving gender dynamics. Works by Chopin (1899) and Cather (1923) provide compelling literary examples of women navigating the shifting expectations placed upon them. Elz (2001), engaging with foundational feminist scholars such as Showalter (1977), examines these literary representations of women's transitions from the restrictive ideals of true womanhood toward the more autonomous and self-defining new woman. These literary heroines vividly embody the cultural tensions of their time, reflecting broader historical movements toward increased female independence and self-realization.

The intersection of feminist realism and postmodernism further enriches this analysis. Lyotard's (1984) skepticism toward grand narratives and Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity illuminate how both fairy tales and realist literature question dominant ideologies and fixed notions of identity. Lyotard's theory helps frame these narratives as cultural texts that challenge rather than merely affirm established truths, while Butler emphasizes how the characters' performances of gender roles highlight the constructed and mutable nature of identity. These theoretical insights underscore the literary texts' capacity to critique the structures they ostensibly support. Central to connecting fairy tales and realist literature are the symbols that breathe life into the stories—birds that whisper of freedom yet keep their wings clipped, flowers that bloom beautifully but wither under watchful eyes. These motifs capture the tension between dreams and reality, between what women are told to be and what they secretly long for.

In *Cinderella*, birds flutter around the heroine, plucking lentils from the ashes, guiding her toward transformation—but always within the limits of a carefully crafted destiny. She is lifted up, yet never truly flies. Edna Pontellier, in *The Awakening* (1899), feels this same push and pull. Living in the strict confines of Creole society, she is a woman who should be content—married, wealthy, a mother—but something within her resists. She watches the sea, listens to its call, and begins to dream of a life outside the roles prescribed to her. Her rebellion is quiet at first—a sketch here, a swim there—but it grows, until she can no longer reconcile who she is with who she is expected to be. Like a bird with a broken wing, she flutters toward freedom, even as the weight of the world pulls her down (Chopin, 1899, p. 108).

Flowers, too, hold a language of their own, especially in *Beauty and the Beast* and *A Lost Lady*. In fairy tales, a rose is a symbol of love, delicate and fleeting, a reminder that beauty must be protected (Tatar, 1992, p. 130). In Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923), Marian Forrester is admired much like a flower in a glass case—beautiful, elegant, meant to be looked at but never truly known. To the men around her, she is an ideal, a figure of grace and charm. But as the years pass, the cracks begin to show. Marian is not simply the embodiment of virtue and refinement; she is restless, unpredictable, unwilling to be confined by the pedestal on which she has been placed (Cather, 1923, p. 78).

Cather layers *A Lost Lady* with flower symbolism that reflects Marian's shifting identity. Roses and wildflowers appear throughout the novel, reflecting her dual existence—both cultivated and untamed. Niel Herbert, the young protagonist who idolizes her, initially sees her as a rare and delicate bloom, but when he learns of her affair, the roses he once gathered for her become tainted, "prickly" in his hands before he discards them into the mud (Cather, 1923, p. 71). This moment echoes the broader tension within the novel—Marian is neither the perfect lady nor a fallen woman; she is something in between, negotiating the space between expectation and self-determination.

These narratives, whether in the form of fairy tales or realist fiction, walk the fine line between conformity and resistance, between what is expected and what is possible. They hold up a mirror to history and ask readers to see not just the heroines, but the weight of the stories that have shaped them. In doing so, they invite us to reconsider the tales we have been told and the roles we continue to play.

II. Postmodern Critiques of Grand Narratives

Fairy tales have long been storytellers of societal order, framing domestic ideals and the boundaries of personal transformation within neat, moralistic resolutions. But as literature evolved, so too did the ways in which these narratives were understood and contested. Postmodernism offers a critical lens through which both fairy tales and realist literature can be examined, particularly in their uneasy relationship with authority, truth, and selfhood.

Jean-François Lyotard's seminal work *The Postmodern Condition* (1983) famously critiques grand narratives—the sweeping, universal stories societies tell themselves about identity, morality, and order—arguing instead that knowledge is fragmented and that no singular version of reality holds dominance (Lyotard, 1983, p. 23). Fairy tales, with their clear-cut morality and rigid societal roles, function as grand narratives that reinforce what is expected of women: patience, virtue, self-sacrifice, and ultimately, fulfillment through domesticity. However, embedded within these tales are small but persistent traces of rebellion, moments where heroines push against their destinies, hinting at the instability of these supposedly fixed truths (Farr, 2019, p. 78).

This tension is also visible in feminist realist literature, which moves beyond the overt moral lessons of fairy tales to explore the unresolved conflicts between societal expectation and personal agency. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity helps illuminate these tensions, arguing that gender is not an inherent identity but a set of performances continuously shaped by external pressures (Butler, 1990, p. 45). This perspective is evident in *The Awakening* (1899), where Edna Pontellier's growing disillusionment with domestic life is framed not as an outright rejection of womanhood, but as a struggle to assert selfhood in a world that offers only prescribed roles. Cather's *A Lost Lady* (1923) similarly captures this negotiation of identity, as Marian Forrester moves between societal expectations of grace and devotion while quietly resisting complete surrender to them (Cather, 1923, p. 42).

In both *The Awakening* and *A Lost Lady*, symbolic elements—birds, flowers, and fragmented settings—mirror this postmodern skepticism toward fixed identities. Birds, which in fairy tales often serve as guides or magical helpers, take on a more complex role in realist literature. In *The Awakening*, the caged parrot and the broken-winged bird become representations of Edna's yearning for freedom but also of the constraints that hold her in place (Chopin, 1899, p. 67). Similarly, Marian Forrester's connection to her garden in *A Lost Lady* reflects both her cultivated charm and the underlying fragility of her carefully maintained role in society (Cather, 1923, p. 88). Tatar (2004) notes that symbols like these encode resistance even within seemingly traditional narratives, offering spaces where female characters can subtly challenge their prescribed roles (Tatar, 2004, p. 102).

Postmodern thought complicates the idea that these moments of resistance lead to definitive change. Bauman's (2000) concept of "liquid modernity" is particularly useful here, emphasizing the instability of identity in an era where traditional social structures no longer provide certainty (Bauman, 2000, p. 67). This instability is reflected in both *The Awakening* and *A Lost Lady*, where the protagonists' fates remain unresolved, mirroring postmodernism's resistance to closure. Unlike fairy tales, which promise transformation through marriage or moral redemption, realist literature leaves readers with ambiguity—suggesting that identity is a fluid, continuously shifting construct rather than a fixed state. As Farr (2019) notes, "stories do not end when the book closes; rather, they echo, unravel, and invite reinterpretation long after their final lines have been read" (Farr, 2019, p. 92).

In this way, both fairy tales and feminist realist literature navigate a delicate balance between tradition and transgression, revealing how narratives that appear to uphold societal norms may, in fact, subtly unravel them from within. Through the destabilization of truth, the questioning of gender roles, and the rejection of singular moral conclusions, these works open the door to ongoing conversations about identity, power, and the nature of storytelling itself.

III. Fairy Tales as Tools of Conformity and Resistance

Fairy tales occupy a paradoxical space in cultural narratives, serving both as instruments of socialization that reinforce existing norms and as subtle vehicles for resistance. Two of the most enduring tales, *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast*, exemplify this duality, promoting ideals of domesticity, patience, and virtue while embedding symbols and narrative structures that allow for alternative, more subversive interpretations. As Bacchilega (1997) argues, fairy tales are "multivalent texts," capable of reinforcing dominant ideologies while simultaneously gesturing toward possibilities for transformation (p. 142). These narratives, while seemingly reinforcing conventional roles, also provide spaces where resistance to societal expectations can emerge.

A. Cinderella: Transformation and Conformity

Cinderella has long been celebrated as a tale of transformation, yet its underlying structure reinforces societal expectations regarding female behavior, submission, and reward. Tatar (2004) observes that Cinderella's journey is one of "passive endurance, where patience and suffering are ultimately rewarded with elevation to a higher social status" (p. 94). Unlike protagonists in other folk traditions, Cinderella does not achieve her transformation through self-determination but rather through the intervention of supernatural forces—a fairy godmother and magical animals—reinforcing the notion that a woman's success is contingent on external validation.

At the same time, the symbolism embedded in the story complicates its seemingly straightforward message. The birds that assist Cinderella, often interpreted as divine emissaries or symbols of fate, also represent a latent agency that exists outside traditional structures of power. In early European variants of the tale, the birds act as active agents of transformation rather than passive enforcers of destiny (Zipes, 2006, p. 89). Their intervention can be read as an externalized manifestation of Cinderella's suppressed desires, subtly suggesting that transformation is not purely imposed upon her but emerges from within. This tension between compliance and agency allows for a reading that complicates the notion of Cinderella as an entirely passive figure.

The resolution of *Cinderella*, culminating in marriage to the prince, aligns with the Victorian ideal of the "True Woman," which Welter (1966) defines as a construct that positioned women as paragons of piety, purity, and domesticity (p. 158). However, moments of subtle rebellion—Cinderella's defiance of her stepfamily, her covert trips to the ball—challenge the strictest interpretations of female passivity. As Bacchilega (2013) notes, "even the most conventional fairy tales contain narrative seams where dominant ideologies are disrupted, allowing alternative readings to emerge" (p. 78). This duality—conformity on the surface, resistance beneath—invites a postmodern reading in which Cinderella's grand narrative of submission is destabilized by its symbolic undercurrents.

What remains most compelling about *Cinderella* is its adaptability—the way it continues to be told, retold, and reinterpreted across generations. Despite its roots in conservative gender expectations, the story's longevity suggests that audiences remain fascinated not by Cinderella's conformity, but by the tension between what she represents and what she might yet become (Zipes, 2012, p. 63).

B. Beauty and the Beast: Emotional Labor and Redemption

If *Cinderella* is a tale of transformation through societal validation, then *Beauty and the Beast* is a story about transformation through emotional labor. Unlike *Cinderella*, Beauty is not granted a physical transformation; instead, she must undertake the emotional and psychological burden of seeing past appearances, offering patience, and ultimately redeeming the beast through her love (Farr, 2019, p. 122). This emphasis on nurturing and sacrifice aligns closely with Victorian gender ideals, where women were expected to be moral guides and emotional caregivers (Welter, 1966, p. 152).

The enchanted rose, a central motif in *Beauty and the Beast*, encapsulates the precarious balance between autonomy and societal expectation. Tatar (1992) describes the rose as "a symbol of femininity that exists at the intersection of beauty and impermanence" (p. 109). In one sense, it represents the fragility of the spell that binds the beast—a warning of what happens when love is withheld. In another, it reflects the delicate position of women in narratives of transformation; their value is often tied to their ability to nurture and sustain relationships rather than to pursue independent desires (Bacchilega, 2013, p. 142).

Beauty's decision to remain with the beast and ultimately transform him has been read both as an act of submission and as an assertion of agency. Some scholars argue that this aspect of the story reclaims a certain level of autonomy, allowing Beauty to engage with her fate on her own terms (Warner, 1995, p. 126). Nevertheless, the ending of *Beauty and the Beast* reinforces a grand narrative of transformation through love, where a woman's care is the key to redemption. Bauman's (2000) concept of "liquid modernity" aligns with this critique, emphasizing how modern relationships exist in a state of flux—Beauty's journey, while presented as a fairy tale, mirrors the way contemporary society still places the burden of emotional labor disproportionately on women (Bauman, 2000, p. 72).

Despite its origins in folklore, *Beauty and the Beast* continues to resonate in modern culture, frequently reimagined in ways that challenge or reinforce its underlying message. In its most traditional form, it remains a testament to the power of patience and love. In its more radical retellings, it becomes an exploration of autonomy, power, and the limits of transformation. As Bacchilega (2013) suggests, "every retelling of *Beauty and the Beast* is, in some way, a negotiation between tradition and subversion" (p. 142).

C. Subversive Elements in Fairy Tales

At first glance, *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* appear to reinforce traditional societal norms—rewarding feminine patience, virtue, and sacrifice with love and social elevation. However, beneath their surface-level conformity, both tales contain symbolic motifs and narrative structures that challenge or complicate these ideals. Farr (2019) points out that the recurring motif of transformation in these tales "reveals a subtle instability in identity and suggests the possibility of self-redefinition" (p. 128). This aligns with Jean-François Lyotard's critique of grand narratives, which asserts that fixed truths and universal meanings are inherently unstable, subject to reinterpretation and disruption (Lyotard, 1984, p. 25).

For instance, the birds in *Cinderella* are not merely enforcers of fate or symbols of divine intervention. Maria Tatar suggests that they "represent an externalization of the heroine's inner strength, indicating that her transformation is not entirely dependent on external forces, but rather an expression of her latent agency" (Tatar, 2004, p. 116). In some versions, particularly older European variants, the birds assist Cinderella not as passive emissaries of fate but as active agents that provide her with means of escape, subtly reinforcing the idea that help often comes from unexpected, liminal spaces—outside conventional structures of power.

Similarly, *Beauty and the Beast*'s enchanted rose embodies the paradox of feminine virtue—it is delicate and beautiful yet fragile and bound by time, much like the societal expectations surrounding women. Bauman's "liquid modernity" thesis offers a useful framework for interpreting this symbol: he argues that "modern symbols of love often carry the weight of societal expectations, reflecting the precariousness of relationships shaped by external pressures" (Bauman, 2000, p. 72).

Fairy tales endure because they contain layers of meaning, allowing each retelling to subtly shift their ideological focus. As Bacchilega (1997) notes, "fairy tales endure precisely because they can be retold and reimagined in ways that challenge the very ideologies they once reinforced" (p. 148). Their adaptability ensures that while they have historically functioned as tools of cultural reinforcement, they also contain elements that invite reinterpretation and resistance.

IV. Postmodern Readings of Fairy Tales

A postmodern reading of *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* reveals how these tales engage with themes of instability, ambiguity, and the fluidity of meaning. Lyotard (1984) famously critiqued grand narratives, arguing that knowledge is no longer legitimized by universal truths but rather by fragmented, localized discourses (p. 29). Applying this framework to fairy tales, one can see how *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* appear to impose rigid moral lessons while simultaneously embedding symbolic disruptions that invite reinterpretation.

Symbolic elements—birds, roses, transformations—function as unstable signifiers, simultaneously upholding and challenging societal norms. Tatar (2004) suggests that fairy tales contain "latent layers of meaning, often at odds with their explicit moral messages" (p. 112). The birds in *Cinderella*, for instance, act as both enforcers of fate and representations of subversive agency, reinforcing the idea that transformation is not purely the result of external intervention. Similarly, the enchanted rose in *Beauty and the Beast* serves as a paradox, symbolizing love's fragility while also embodying the weight of societal expectations placed upon women. As Bauman (2000) contends, "modern symbols of love are inherently unstable, reflecting broader anxieties about self-identity and relational permanence" (p. 72).

Butler's (1990) theory of performativity provides another lens through which to analyze these tales, particularly in relation to gender expectations. Butler posits that gender is not an innate identity but rather "a set of repeated performances shaped by social norms" (p. 52). Within *Beauty and the Beast*, Beauty's role as the redeemer of the Beast can be seen as both a fulfillment of and a challenge to traditional feminine expectations. While her emotional labor reinforces the notion that women must "fix" flawed men through patience and care, her eventual transformation of the Beast also suggests that identity itself is malleable. Zipes (2006) describes fairy tales as "ideological battlegrounds, where conformity and resistance coexist within the same narrative space" (p. 89), further emphasizing their postmodern potential for multiple, often contradictory, interpretations.

Cinderella and *Beauty and the Beast* thus serve a dual function in cultural narratives. On one hand, they reinforce traditional gender roles by rewarding compliance with societal expectations. On the other, they contain moments of resistance—symbolic motifs, ambiguous character motivations, and variations across different retellings—that invite alternative readings. As Bacchilega (1997) explains, "fairy tales operate within structures of power, but they also expose the fissures in those structures, making them ripe for reinterpretation" (p. 142). This tension between ideological reinforcement and subversion reflects the broader postmodern interest in deconstructing fixed identities and questioning the legitimacy of grand narratives.

V. Realist Literature as Proto-Postmodern Critiques

Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899) depicts the journey of Edna Pontellier, a woman navigating the constraints of 19th-century society and her roles as wife and mother. Feminist realist literature, particularly represented by Chopin's novel, bridges the gap between the structured moral resolutions of fairy tales and the fragmented, destabilized narratives of postmodernism. Unlike fairy tales, which typically conclude with clear moral lessons and definitive resolutions, *The Awakening* resists closure by presenting a protagonist whose struggle for autonomy remains unresolved. Elz (2003) suggests that Chopin's work "foregrounds the tensions between societal expectations and personal autonomy, marking a transition toward the fragmented self of postmodern literature" (p. 85). In this way, Chopin's novel serves as a proto-postmodern critique of rigidly defined identities, particularly in relation to gender roles and domestic expectations.

A. Edna Pontellier in the Awakening: Freedom and Confinement

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* chronicles Edna Pontellier's journey toward self-discovery and her struggle against the constraints of societal norms. Elz (2003) highlights that Edna's story "foregrounds the tensions between societal expectations and individual autonomy, making her a proto-postmodern figure in her rejection of prescriptive roles" (p. 85). Her dissatisfaction with marriage and motherhood places her in direct opposition to the nineteenth-century ideal of domesticity, which prioritized obedience and self-sacrifice within the household (Welter, 1966, p. 152).

One of the novel's most potent symbols, the caged parrot in the opening scene, encapsulates Edna's entrapment within societal expectations. Birds in fairy tales often symbolize transformation, yet here, the parrot's repetitive speech suggests a lack of true agency. As Elz (2003) notes, "the bird motif in *The Awakening* reflects Edna's struggle to articulate a self-outside of the roles prescribed for her" (p. 89). This theme recurs later in the novel, when Edna envisions a bird with a broken wing falling from the sky—an image that foreshadows her own fate.

Chopin's nuanced depiction of Edna's emotional and psychological world underscores the limitations of her rebellion. At one point, Edna reflects on her perceived independence, stating, "I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose" (Chopin, 1899, p. 108). This declaration marks a pivotal moment in her journey toward self-awareness, yet it also underscores the societal backlash she faces. Critics like Gilbert and Gubar (1979) have interpreted such moments as both empowering and tragic, reflecting "the conflict between the yearning for autonomy and the reality of structural control" (p. 201).

Edna's final act—walking into the sea—has been widely debated as both an assertion of freedom and an acknowledgment of insurmountable barriers. The sea, as a recurring symbol, represents both possibility and dissolution. Chopin describes the sea as "a sensuous, inviting embrace" (p. 153), underscoring Edna's longing for escape, yet its vastness reflects the existential uncertainty of her decision. While Gilbert and Gubar (1979) see Edna's immersion in the sea as a rejection of societal constraints, Elz (2003) interprets it as "a tragic commentary on the limits of resistance within a rigidly defined world" (p. 94). This ambiguity reinforces the novel's engagement with postmodern concerns about the instability of identity and meaning.

B. Symbolism as a Bridge Between Realism and Postmodernism

The symbolic elements in *The Awakening* blur the boundaries between realist literature and postmodernist critiques of societal norms. The recurring bird imagery, for example, functions as both a metaphor for Edna's aspirations and a reminder of the structural limitations she faces. Elz (2003) contends that "the motif of birds in *The Awakening* reveals the paradox of female autonomy—the simultaneous pull toward freedom and the constraints that make such freedom precarious" (p. 90). This contrasts sharply with the fairy tale birds in *Cinderella*, which function as facilitators of transformation within an established order.

Similarly, the sea serves as a complex symbol of both liberation and dissolution. In fairy tales, bodies of water often signify renewal—baptismal rebirths or transformative thresholds. However, in *The Awakening*, the sea is neither wholly redemptive nor entirely destructive. Rather, it embodies what Bauman (2000) describes as "liquid modernity," where personal identity is in constant flux, untethered from stable structures (p. 67). The instability of Edna's identity—her oscillation between domesticity and independence—mirrors Bauman's argument that modernity, rather than providing liberation, often replaces fixed identities with a state of perpetual uncertainty.

Unlike fairy tales, which often conclude with moral certainty, *The Awakening* resists definitive resolutions. Edna's journey does not culminate in a traditional form of success—marriage, reconciliation, or social ascension—but rather in an act that invites multiple interpretations. This aligns with Butler's (1990) assertion that identity is not a fixed state but "a continuous negotiation of societal norms and personal desires" (p. 52). Chopin's refusal to provide closure marks a departure from the narrative conventions of her time, anticipating the fragmented, open-ended structures of postmodern fiction.

By contrasting *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* with *The Awakening*, one can see the transition from fixed ideological frameworks to narratives that embrace uncertainty and contradiction. The structured transformations in fairy tales give way to the unresolved struggles of realist literature, reflecting a shift from clear moral lessons to explorations of identity in flux. In this way, Chopin's novel functions as a proto-postmodern critique, using symbolism and narrative instability to expose the fragile foundations of prescribed gender roles.

VI. Postmodernist Perspectives on Endings

The contrasting approaches to endings in fairy tales and realist literature align with broader postmodern critiques of narrative closure. Fairy tales traditionally offer neatly resolved conclusions that reinforce societal structures, while realist literature resists such finality, embracing complexity and uncertainty. Jean-François Lyotard's critique of grand narratives provides a useful framework for understanding this divergence. He argues that overarching narratives impose artificial resolutions on complex realities, simplifying conflicts into digestible moral lessons (Lyotard, 1984, p. 31). This is particularly evident in fairy tales, where conflicts are resolved through marriage, transformation, or redemption, reinforcing the stability of prescribed identities.

By contrast, realist literature challenges this tendency toward resolution. Rather than offering definitive endings, it embraces the fragmentation and plurality of lived experience. In *The Awakening*, for example, Kate Chopin refuses to provide a conventional conclusion, instead leaving Edna Pontellier's fate open to interpretation. Bacchilega (1997) explores this shift in *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, examining how contemporary retellings of classic stories challenge the notion of narrative certainty. She writes, "The refusal to provide closure in postmodern narratives reflects a broader critique of societal structures that prioritize stability over individual complexity" (p. 172). This perspective highlights the transformative potential of ambiguity, which invites readers to question dominant narratives and explore alternative interpretations.

The same principle applies to *Beauty and the Beast* and *Cinderella*. While these tales initially seem to reinforce traditional ideals, their symbolic elements suggest an undercurrent of instability. The enchanted rose in *Beauty and the Beast*, for example, represents both love's endurance and its fragility, mirroring the tension between security and impermanence in social relationships (Tatar, 2004, p. 109). Similarly, the birds in *Cinderella* can be read as both enforcers of fate and quiet agents of rebellion, depending on the reader's perspective. In this way, even fairy tales contain moments of ambiguity that complicate their outwardly rigid structures.

The ambiguous endings of realist literature, particularly in works like *The Awakening*, disrupt the clear moral and social messages often found in fairy tales. Rather than providing a reassuring sense of order, Chopin's novel embraces the uncertainty of individual agency within a restrictive society. This aligns with Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, which argues that identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process of negotiation and repetition. "Identity is constructed through repeated performances, yet these performances also reveal the instability of the roles they seek to uphold" (p. 60). In this context, Edna's refusal to conform to expectations destabilizes societal norms, just as *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* contain elements that subtly question the structures they reinforce.

Welter's (1966) concept of the "Cult of True Womanhood" further contextualizes this contrast. She argues that nineteenth-century women were expected to embody piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness, virtues that fairy tale heroines often exemplify (p. 150). In contrast, *The Awakening* challenges these ideals by portraying a protagonist who actively resists them. Edna's rejection of her prescribed role disrupts the comforting resolutions of traditional narratives, forcing readers to confront the limitations of societal expectations.

Gilbert and Gubar (1979), in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, expand on this idea, suggesting that ambiguous narratives serve as critiques of the rigid frameworks that shape personal identities. "Stories that refuse closure force readers to reckon with the contradictions inherent in the cultural scripts that define identity" (p. 211). Edna's unresolved story exemplifies this critique, revealing how societal expectations shape individuals and how resisting them often comes at a cost.

In contrast, fairy tale heroines rarely face such existential uncertainty. Their narratives are neatly tied to moral resolutions, where virtue is rewarded, and transgression is corrected. Yet, when examined through a postmodern lens, these tales reveal spaces of resistance within their own structures. The transformation of the beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, for instance, raises questions about whether identity is inherently stable or subject to external validation. Similarly, Cinderella's journey, while outwardly conforming, is facilitated by forces outside traditional power structures—birds, fairy godmothers, and nature. These elements, though subtle, hint at the instability of the very roles these stories appear to reinforce.

By comparing *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* with *The Awakening*, a clear shift emerges—from stories that resolve identity within a prescribed structure to narratives that embrace ambiguity and fluidity. Fairy tales function as cultural artifacts that reinforce dominant ideologies, but their longevity stems from their ability to be reinterpreted across time. Realist literature, by contrast, refuses simple answers, positioning itself as a counterpoint to the assurances offered by earlier narrative forms.

Thus, while fairy tales provide structured moral conclusions, realist literature invites uncertainty. Edna's story, rather than being a triumphant assertion of autonomy or a cautionary tale, exists in the in-between space—neither fully resolved nor entirely open-ended. In this way, Chopin's work embodies postmodernism's embrace of instability, revealing the limitations of rigid societal roles and the enduring power of narratives that refuse easy answers.

VII. Conclusion

The contrast between the fixed endings of fairy tales and the unresolved conclusions of realist literature underscores the ideological and cultural functions of storytelling. Fairy tales, as cultural artifacts, reinforce societal norms by offering a structured moral framework in which virtue is rewarded, and transgressions are punished. In contrast, realist literature

resists closure, instead embracing the complexities of human experience, the instability of identity, and the fluidity of social expectations.

Traditional fairy tales such as *Cinderella* and *Beauty and the Beast* reflect and perpetuate prescribed roles, often tying a heroine's fulfillment to marriage and social acceptance. As Maria Tatar notes, "The structure of fairy tale endings serves as a reassurance that the social order remains intact, rewarding characters who embody societal ideals" (Tatar, 2004, p. 145). This aligns with Barbara Welter's concept of the "Cult of True Womanhood," which defined a woman's success in terms of her adherence to domestic ideals (Welter, 1966, p. 152). The enchanted rose in *Beauty and the Beast*, for instance, epitomizes this delicate balance between love, duty, and societal expectation, symbolizing both the fragility and permanence of traditional roles.

However, as fairy tales have evolved, modern adaptations have increasingly challenged these fixed narratives. Bacchilega (1997) argues that "the narrative structures of traditional fairy tales have been deconstructed in contemporary retellings, revealing the artificiality of their moral lessons and social messages" (p. 178). These reinterpretations demonstrate a growing awareness of the limitations imposed by conventional narratives, highlighting a shift toward more fluid and open-ended storytelling.

By contrast, *The Awakening* exemplifies the realist rejection of neatly resolved conclusions. Edna Pontellier's journey does not follow the fairy tale trajectory toward romantic fulfillment but instead culminates in an act of defiance that resists easy interpretation. Chopin's evocative description of the sea as "inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude" (Chopin, 1899, p. 152) captures both the allure of autonomy and the weight of uncertainty. As A. Elizabeth Elz observes, "Edna's final moments encapsulate the essence of literature that refuses to provide easy resolutions, instead presenting a reality fraught with contradiction and struggle" (Elz, 2003, p. 98).

This contrast between structured fairy tale endings and the ambiguity of realist literature has significant implications for the study of narrative form. Judith Butler's theory of performativity suggests that identity is not a fixed essence but rather a series of repeated acts shaped by social norms (Butler, 1990, p. 58). Fairy tale heroines, through their adherence to prescribed roles, reinforce this notion of identity as performance. Yet, realist heroines like Edna Pontellier disrupt this framework, exposing the limitations of socially constructed identities.

Similarly, Jean-François Lyotard's critique of grand narratives highlights the way realist literature resists overarching structures that seek to impose meaning and order. He argues that "the fragmentation of narrative is essential to resisting the totalizing force of dominant ideologies" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 33). *The Awakening* embodies this fragmentation, offering a protagonist who does not conform to a singular resolution but instead exists within the tensions and contradictions of real-life struggles.

Symbolism further reinforces these differences. The birds in *Cinderella* serve as enforcers of fate, guiding the protagonist toward an ending that rewards her virtue. In contrast, the broken-winged bird in *The Awakening* signifies Edna's resistance and ultimate vulnerability. Chopin writes, "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (Chopin, 1899, p. 151). This imagery encapsulates the impossibility of full autonomy within a rigidly structured society.

Beyond literary analysis, these narrative differences mirror shifting social landscapes in which identities are not fixed but constantly renegotiated. The structured resolutions of fairy tales offer reassurance, maintaining a sense of order and predictability, while realist literature embraces complexity and ambiguity, challenging readers to confront the uncertainties of selfhood and societal roles. This tension between closure and open-endedness invites further exploration into how literature both reflects and reshapes cultural realities.

By resisting closure, works like *The Awakening* encourage readers to engage with complexity, questioning narratives that have historically defined autonomy, fulfillment, and identity. While fairy tales provide comfort through their structured conclusions, realist literature demands introspection, acknowledging that the search for meaning is an ongoing and often unresolved process. This distinction underscores the power of literature not only as a reflection of societal values but as an evolving force capable of questioning and reshaping them.

Thus, the fairy tale's promise of stability and the realist novel's embrace of uncertainty are not merely stylistic differences but ideological statements about the nature of human experience. As storytelling continues to evolve, the tension between closure and ambiguity remains central to discussions of literature, identity, and the fluidity of societal expectations.

Ultimately, the phrase "once upon a time" is not just a formulaic opening but a transformative threshold, one that invites reinterpretation and reimagination. These stories—whether fairy tales or realist fiction—serve as spaces where the past is revisited, where voices long silenced are reconsidered, and where new possibilities emerge. Rather than dictating what must be, they remind us of what could be.

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