

The Cinder Maid

Classic fairytales tend to have easily identifiable villains, often physically deformed in some way by being fat, dwarfish or gigantic. Heroines are often helpless and fall prey to evil magic or misfortune through some slight fault of their own. Heroes are gallant, brave and usually only arrive at the end of the story where they rescue the girl often with a kiss, without asking her first. Success almost always involves marriage, again something which the heroines don't appear to have much say in. The story ends happily with the hero achieving his beautiful trophy wife and the heroine swapping her life of honest hard work for wealth and power.

Once upon a time, though it was not in my time or in your time, or in anybody else's time, there was a great king who had an only son, the prince and heir who was about to come of age. So the king sent round a herald who should blow his trumpet at every four corners where two roads met. And when the people came together he would call out, "O yes, O yes, O yes, know ye that his grace the king will give on Monday sennight" -- that meant seven nights or a week after -- "a royal ball to which all maidens of noble birth are hereby summoned; and be it furthermore known unto you that at this ball his highness the prince will select unto himself a lady that shall be his bride and our future queen. God save the king."

Now there was among the nobles of the king's court one who had married twice, and by the first marriage he had but one daughter, and as she was growing up her father thought that she ought to have someone to look after her. So he married again, a lady with two daughters, and his new wife, instead of caring for his daughter, thought only of her own and favored them in every way. She would give them beautiful dresses but none to her stepdaughter who had only to wear the castoff clothes of the other two. The noble's daughter was set to do all the drudgery of the house, to attend the kitchen fire, and had naught to sleep on but the heap of cinder raked out in the scullery; and that is why they called her Cinder Maid. And no one took pity on her and she would go and weep at her mother's grave where she had planted a hazel tree, under which she sat.

Now when the night came for the royal ball Cinder Maid had to help the two sisters to dress in their fine dresses and saw them drive off in the carriage with her father and their mother. But she went to her own mother's grave and sat beneath the hazel tree and wept and cried out:

Tree o' mine, O tree o' me, With my tears I've watered thee;
Make me a lady fair to see, Dress me as splendid as can be.

And with that the little bird on the tree called out to her:

Cinder Maid, Cinder Maid, shake the tree,
Open the first nut that you see.

So Cinder Maid shook the tree and the first nut that fell she took up and opened, and what do you think she saw? -- a beautiful silk dress blue as the heavens, all embroidered with stars, and two little lovely shoes made of shining copper. And when she had dressed herself the hazel tree opened and from it came a coach all made of copper with four milk-white horses, with coachman and footmen all complete. And as she drove away the little bird called out to her:

Be home, be home ere mid-o'-night
Or else again you'll be a fright.

Comment [K1]: Classic fairy tale opening line

Comment [K2]: The world is basically the same, although far enough removed from ours to be magical

Comment [K3]: Fairytales are always full of extremes: kings are either great or evil. No king in a fairytale is ever a moderately good ruler with a sensible economic policy

Comment [K4]: The use of anachronistic phrases to give it an authentic fairy tale 'Ye Olde Worlde' feel

Comment [K5]: Gentle, friendly asides from the narrator to help guide readers through the story

Comment [K6]: Again the story tends to feature on the lives of the noble -- i.e. rich -- or those who aspire to be so. Fairytales rarely concern themselves with the poor, unless they are eventually to become rich

Comment [K7]: Notice that the women have no say in this arrangement -- she is **selected** by the prince. The women can't even choose not to go: they have been summoned

Comment [K8]: Fairytales are always great at supporting authoritarian figures of power, usually kings and queens. No fairy tale ever says 'God save the democratically elected representative government who are accountable to the people.'

Comment [K9]: Again the idea of nobility being intricately tied to wealth and status -- it is as if the poor cannot be noble. Anyone who is poor and noble usually ends up rich as if to say that the mistake has been rectified.

Comment [K10]: The heroine has to endure hardship to evoke sympathy for her and to entitle her to her eventual reward when she marries the prince. Notice the exaggerated nature of this hardship: why sleeping on cinders? Why not just sleep on the floor?

Comment [K11]: Fairytales are often focused around a grand occasion -- ball, wedding, christening

Comment [K12]: Cinder does not argue or fight back -- she weeps, adopting the acceptable meek position of a woman who does nothing to help herself or fight against the unfair system -- this kind of ideal woman can only be helped by someone / something else

Comment [K13]: Hence the magic hazelnut tree. By not fighting against the system but being rewarded by a Fairy Godmother, or Magic Hazlenut Tree in this case, the story suggests that if individuals suffer enough, and put up with enough misery and hardship without doing anything to make their lives better themselves then they will eventually be rewarded. The fact that we need to invent Magic Hazlenut Trees to achieve this transformation shows how ridiculous the idea is.

Comment [K14]: Pantomime style questions to draw in the audience

Comment [K15]: Again the clothing is extreme -- as blue as the heavens -- compared to her cast-offs from before

Comment [K16]: Fairytales often include a rule that is usually broken and is often the cause of the heroines problems. Teaching us that rule breaking is bad