

## English 102

### Writing Topics: "Fairy Tales: A Closer Look at Cinderella"

Choose one of the following topics and write an essay of at least five pages in response (longer is OK). In your essay, be sure to **make explicit references and connections to two or more of the essays** we have read (Jones, Bettelheim, Schectman, Kolbensschlag, Kelley).

Keep in mind that you are writing an essay that is **analytical and persuasive** and that you need to **take a position and argue a point of view**, not merely summarize a text or a film without offering evidence to support your own argument about its meaning or significance.

Most of these topics are based on films that use fairy tales or fairy tale themes. If you choose one of these, you will need to watch the film at least twice, and then analyze it to determine what kinds of messages or themes are evident in the film and how they can be interpreted, as Karol Kelley has done in her analysis of Disney's *Cinderella* and *Pretty Woman*. If you use Kelley's methods and/or ideas for your own analysis, remember to cite and credit her work in your essay. A couple of points to remember in writing about film: 1) Assume that *everything* in a film is intentional (dialogue, sets, costumes, lighting, etc.), the result of decisions made by the writers and filmmakers, so part of your analysis involves asking yourself *why* those choices or decisions were made; and 2) When referring to the people in a film, use the names of the characters, not the actors.

1. Though on the surface they don't appear to be traditional Cinderella stories, the films *Muriel's Wedding*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, *Real Women Have Curves*, and *Point of No Return* can all be read as modern versions of the Cinderella tale. Choose and watch one of these films; then **using the five characteristics of a fairy tale Jones identifies (listed near the end of his essay) and some of the major elements of a Cinderella story (an abused heroine; an evil stepmother/sisters; an absent father; a prince; a slipper; a midnight curfew; magic), argue how the film you have chosen fits the criteria for a Cinderella tale, citing specific aspects of the movie to support your argument.** In your analysis, explain how the various characters' roles in the fairy tale are portrayed in the film. Are there elements of the film that are difficult to explain as part of a Cinderella story? If so, how do you account for them? What is the "moral of the story?" Be sure to make use of the critical essays to answer this last question.

2. Many people have argued that although *Ever After* seems to be a modern feminist version of Cinderella, the changes are all on the surface and the film simply reinforces traditional gender roles and stereotypes, as Kelley argues is true of *Pretty Woman*. **Do you agree that *Ever After* merely purports to espouse feminist principles in order to appeal to a modern audience, or do you think that the changes in gender portrayals shown in the film are more fundamental, presenting a significant challenge to prevailing notions about traditional gender roles and stereotypes?** Using some of Kelley's criteria, analyze *Ever After* and offer evidence from it and from the critical texts we've read to show whether you think it **reinforces** or **challenges** the traditional roles seen in Disney's *Cinderella*. Be sure to make use of at least one other critical essay in addition to Kelley to support your argument.

3. Women's clothes are often used symbolically to indicate a transformation from one stage of life to another (a rite of passage), as with a confirmation dress, a wedding dress, or an interview suit. As Kelley points out, both Disney's Cinderella and Vivian in *Pretty Woman* "need the right clothing to make them marriageable" (¶24). Conversely, in the film *Bridget Jones' Diary*, try as she might, Bridget Jones consistently fails at "transforming" herself into the better, thinner, more fashionable person she thinks she must become, yet she still wins her "prince" in the end. How can this be explained? Does the film represent an updating or a reversal of the traditional Cinderella tale in which a woman must change herself to make her appealing to suitors? **In an essay, analyze the film to determine if it is a kind of anti-Cinderella story, making use of at least two of the critical essays in your analysis.**

4. The film *My Best Friend's Wedding* is a Cinderella story told from the point of view of a stepsister rather than Cinderella, and in the process the stepsister becomes a more sympathetic character than in most versions of the tale. Similarly, in their essays, both Schectman and Rossner examine the story from the perspective of the stepmother and stepsisters to help us understand their actions and motives. **In an essay, analyze the characters in this film, in particular Julianne, Kimmie, and Michael, making use of Schectman's ideas, as well as Rossner's (or one of the other authors) to explain why the characters behave as they do. In particular, consider the ending of the film: what is the "moral of the story"?** (Although we did not discuss Rossner's essay in class, you will need to read it for this topic. It's in our text on p. 596-99.)

5. In his book *The Fairy Tale*, Steven Jones includes a chapter on "Fairy Tales with Male Protagonists," in which he states,

These protagonists engage in a quest that involves their interaction with the magical realm. This realm is presented not only as legitimately existing, but also as having an important influence on the quotidian world of the protagonists, and therefore by implication on the everyday lives of the audience members. . . . The happy ending serves to illustrate the moral dominion of this magical realm and the benefits of living one's life in harmony with it. . . . [T]he themes of these tales concern the typical issues of reconciling hostile attitudes toward older males or father figures, winning a mate, and establishing a domain of one's own. (44-45)

**Watch *The Natural*, *Field of Dreams*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, or *The Hudsucker Proxy*. In an essay, analyze the film to see how it fits Jones' criteria for a fairy tale with a male protagonist.** First, using Jones' essay "The Thematic Core of Fairy Tales," determine the necessary elements that define a story as a fairy tale (listed near the end of his essay). Then discuss the presence or absence of these elements and of the ones cited above (especially the "magical realm" and the oedipal struggles of the protagonist) in the film you've chosen.

6. Advertisers often use fairy tale themes in marketing products for adult audiences, products that have no overt connection to fairy tales (unlike magic wands, for instance). Choose one such magazine advertisement that contains a fairy tale theme, and **analyze how the advertisers make use of the audience's knowledge of fairy tales. In your analysis, be sure to pay close attention to the images and details in the ad, no matter how tiny or insignificant they may seem, to see how they are used to convey the message visually.** What fairy tale is used? How,

specifically, is the fairy tale represented in the ad? What images or unconscious responses do the advertisers hope to evoke in their use of the fairy tale? Who is the intended audience for the advertisement? How can you apply the ideas in the critical essays we have read to your analysis of the advertisement? (Be sure to include a copy of the ad with your essay.)

7. In her essay “*Pretty Woman: A Modern Cinderella*,” Karol Kelley offers a critique of Disney’s *Cinderella* and the 1990 film *Pretty Woman*, concluding that despite being produced over 40 years apart, the two versions of the Cinderella tale are not very different in their depictions of gender roles. Like *Pretty Woman*, *Maid in Manhattan* also uses the Cinderella theme in a modern setting. **Using some of Kelley’s criteria, do your own analysis of the ways gender is depicted in *Maid in Manhattan*. Do you think that the film’s portrayals of gender roles are more progressive and feminist than those seen in Disney’s *Cinderella*, or do they, as Kelley argues of *Pretty Woman*, simply reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes?**

8. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, from which the reading in our text is taken, Bruno Bettelheim analyzes fairy tales from a Freudian perspective. Read his analysis of Snow White on pages 199-215 of *The Uses of Enchantment* (on reserve in the library), and then watch the film version of the tale called *Snow White: A Tale of Terror*, with Sigourney Weaver. **In an essay, examine how Bettelheim’s analyses of Snow White apply to this film version, considering especially the role of the father and the oedipal conflicts that Snow White goes through with her stepmother.** How are these Freudian issues depicted in this version of the film? How does the use of the “horror” genre either amplify or downplay the Freudian elements?

9. The film *My Best Friend’s Wedding* seems to be a kind of “anti-fairy tale” -- or is it? Watch and analyze the film to see whether it fits the criteria of a fairy tale. First, using Jones’ essay, determine the necessary elements that define a story as a fairy tale (listed near the end of his essay), and then analyze and explain the presence or absence of these elements in this film. **Does this film fit the criteria for a fairy tale? What is the implicit message of the film, and how does it relate to the fairy tale format (in other words, why did the filmmakers choose to make this a fairy tale or not)?** Consider how the essays we’ve read pertain to the film, and be sure to explore the significance of your comparisons and findings.

10. In her essay “*Pretty Woman: A Modern Cinderella*,” Karol Kelley offers a feminist critique of Disney’s *Cinderella* and the 1990 film *Pretty Woman*, concluding that despite being produced over 40 years apart, the two versions of the Cinderella tale are not very different in their depictions of gender roles. Made two years before *Pretty Woman*, *Working Girl* also uses the Cinderella theme in a modern setting. **Using some of Kelley’s criteria, do your own analysis of the ways gender roles are portrayed in *Working Girl*. Do you think the film’s depictions of gender roles are truly progressive and feminist, or do they simply reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes?**