

The Glass Slipper Short Guide

The Glass Slipper by Charles Perrault

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Overview

Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose*, published in 1697, is often cited by critics as the first important volume published specifically for young adults. Most or all of the tales that he collected in the book had been passed along orally, and it was Perrault who gave them their definitive literary form. Almost all readers become familiar with such stories as "The Sleeping Beauty," "Little Red Ridinghood," "Puss in Boots," and "Cinderella" at an early age. These stories have been edited and retold in countless different ways since Perrault wrote them down in 1697, and are now so familiar that modern readers often take them for granted.

Perrault's versions of these fairy tales are the literary models from which the various modern adaptations are derived.

In preparing his translation, Bierhorst worked from facsimiles of the original seventeenth-century edition of Perrault's book in order to keep his translation as close to the original as possible.

His notes provide important historical background for the tales.

The illustrations by Michael Miller depict the buildings and costumes of Perrault's time with considerable care and accuracy. The focus, however, is the highly expressive faces of the characters. Miller uses subtle gradations of black and white which aid the imagination without overwhelming it.

About the Author

Charles Perrault was born January 12, 1628, into a wealthy Parisian family. For a short time he attended the College of Beavoir, where he had difficulty in deciding on a course of study. In 1651 he received a degree in law from the University of Orleans. After a few years, however, he gave up law to pursue his interests in literature and architecture. In 1671 he was named to the prestigious French Academy. He then proceeded to outrage some of his colleagues and start a vigorous debate by proclaiming that contemporary authors were superior to ancient ones.

At the age of forty-four Perrault married Marie Guichon, with whom he had three sons (and perhaps a daughter).

When his wife died after six years of marriage, he found himself solely responsible for the task of raising their children.

Charles Perrault published his famous collection of fairy tales entitled *Contes de ma mere l'oye* (The Tales of Mother Goose) in 1697. Although the popularity of these stories spread rapidly, Perrault probably never suspected that they would be his best-remembered works.

He died on May 15, 1703, in Paris.

The Glass Slipper was translated and edited by John Bierhorst, an American folklorist best known for his translations and adaptations of Native American stories, such as *In the Trial of the Wind: American Indian Poems and Ritual Orations* (1971).

Setting

Most of these tales have been retold in many different times and places. Several hundred versions of "Cinderella," for example, have been recorded. The earliest known version was written in China in the middle of the ninth century. Perrault set his version of the tales in his own time and place—France at the end of the seventeenth century. He presents a full panorama of French life, from the finery of the court where Cinderella attends a ball to the modest homes of peasants and tradesmen. The majority of the characters, however, come from the middle class.



Social Sensitivity

The tales of Perrault reflect the values of both the French upper middle class and the nobility during the reign of Louis XIV. While these values are not sufficiently different from modern ones to require a lengthy explanation, it is useful to maintain some historical perspective.

Throughout the book Perrault places an emphasis on expensive finery.

Jewels, gold, and elaborate gowns are lovingly described. To some modern readers this feature could suggest an overly materialistic orientation. Greed, however, is always punished in the stories. For example, the covetous sister in "Diamonds and Toads" loses everything. Perrault's tales are set in a society without much social mobility, where it is easy to admire finery without actively desiring it. There is, in fact, an appealing naivete in Perrault's enjoyment of ornaments like jewels.

All of the young people in these tales, especially the girls, think only of marriage—rather than a career—as the symbol of their passage into adulthood.

This is partly because the society in which they lived was not as specialized or complex as that of today. A career, if a person had a career at all, did not require as much planning and study as it does today.

A feature of the book that may trouble some readers is the identification of goodness with beauty, especially for young women. In stories such as "Cinderella" and "Diamonds and Toads," the beautiful daughter is also the virtuous one. This is true of many other collections of fairy tales such as those of the Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Andersen. Perrault's stories are unlikely to encourage superficiality, however, if the reader bears in mind that beauty is largely understood as expressing a spiritual quality. Fairy tales tend to identify physical and psychological reality with each other. Perrault even makes his understanding of beauty explicit in some of his digressions. At the end of the story which bears his name, the ugly Ricketty Topknot is transformed into "the handsomest man in the world."

"They say," Perrault explains, "that having turned her thoughts toward her lover's determination, his good judgment, and his fine qualities of heart and mind, the princess no longer noticed that his body was deformed or that his face was ugly."

Parents and teachers should be aware that Perrault's tales, while very restrained in comparison to some contemporary entertainments, contain more explicit violence and sexuality than the familiar Disney adaptations.

Literary Qualities

Perrault was one of the first authors to record fairy tales from the oral tradition.

The stories of Perrault do not have the earthy simplicity of the Grimm brothers or the delicate pathos of Hans Christian Andersen, but they are more charming and elegant than those of his successors. Perrault uses a relaxed, colloquial style that follows the natural rhythms of speech. His straightforward narrative is occasionally interrupted by philosophic observations and other digressions.

Several passages show the love of ornament typical of the seventeenth-century French court. An example is the famous scene where the fairy godmother turns a pumpkin into a coach, mice into horses, a rat into a coachman, lizards into footmen, and an old dress into an elaborate gold and silver gown.

There is an ongoing debate as to how closely Perrault followed the oral traditions. In many passages, such as the scene in which Sleeping Beauty is awakened by her prince, Perrault adopts a playfully ironic tone. Some critics feel this suggests a level of sophistication inappropriate for the material. They criticize Perrault for an allegedly patronizing attitude toward his tales and their audience. Other critics, however, believe that Perrault wrote his stories as they were told to him, and find his digressions appropriate for a storyteller.

Themes and Characters

Characters in fairy tales are easy to identify with, yet are not highly individualized. Perrault does not describe the personality or appearance of his characters in detail; the heroes and heroines of his stories can easily stand for countless other young men and women.

Perrault ended his fairy tales with morals, but almost all critics feel that these lessons are not essential to his stories. In this edition the morals have been included in an appendix.

With the exception of "Little Red Ridinghood," the stories tend to end happily, with good triumphing over evil.

Another possible exception is "Puss in Boots," in which the hero triumphs, but is of questionable moral stature.

The most common theme in fairy tales is the process of maturation. Characters like Cinderella and Ricketty Topknot marry and assume a place in their society. The fairy tales of Perrault have been extensively analyzed by various psychologists, anthropologists, and social critics, some of whom have produced highly complex interpretations. But, interesting as some of these theories may be, they certainly are not necessary for the enjoyment of the tales.



Topics for Discussion

1. Compare Perrault's "Cinderella" with the animated version by Disney.

What changes does Disney make?

Which version do you prefer?

2. Perrault's version of the story "Little Red Ridinghood" ends with the young girl being eaten by the wolf. The version by the Grimm brothers, often entitled "Little Red Cap" in English, has a happy ending. Which ending do you think is more appropriate?

3. When most people could not read or afford many books, tales were passed on primarily by storytelling. What advantages are there in having tales told rather than read?

4. Bierhorst places Perrault's morals in an appendix. Do you think the morals add to the tales or detract from them?

Do you think Bierhorst should have left the morals where Perrault originally put them, at the end of each tale?

5. In "Hop o' My Thumb" only the ogre is really vicious, but his wife and daughters must also suffer because of his actions. Do you think that this is unfair? Is Hop o' My Thumb right to trick the ogre's wife and steal her riches?

6. In "Puss in Boots" the cat is a trickster. Do you think it is right that he should be rewarded for trickery? If not, how does the injustice affect the story?

7. Perrault's version of "Cinderella" is probably the most beloved fairy tale ever written. What do you think accounts for this story's appeal?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Many artists have illustrated the tales of Perrault. A few of the most famous are Gustave Dore, Edmund Dulac, Arthur Rackham, and George Cruikshank. Compare illustrations from past collections of Mother Goose tales with those by Michael Miller in *The Glass Slipper*. Which do you like best? Why?
2. These tales are set in France at the end of the seventeenth century. Based on what you can see in the tales, what would it have been like to have lived in that time and place?
3. Perrault's tales do not feature any witches or wizards, but they do have ogres. What kind of a creature was an ogre? Do ogres appear in tales from countries other than France?
4. What is the origin of the term "fairy tale"? What are some common characteristics of such stories?
5. Rewrite one of the tales in *The Glass Slipper* from the point of view of the villain.

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