Art and Fairy Tales in an interdisciplinary interplay: teaching interventions towards negotiation and subversion of gender roles and stereotypes

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Abstract

The interdisciplinary project under discussion is suitable to be addressed to students of either primary or secondary education and it interweaves the art of painting with fairy tales. The aims of the project are: the deeper understanding of the complexity of human nature and the sensitization of students regarding gender roles and stereotypes.

On the occasion of a visit at the Museum of Modern Greek Art of Rhodes and with the painting of D. Mytaras, named "Woman in the Mirror" as a pretext, we started a discussion which resulted in a focused project, through which students who participated in it, improved self-perception, promoted their communication competence, realized the existence of gender stereotypes, negotiated the dominant viewpoints and even adopted critical stances that challenged gender inequality. The mirror was the starting point from which the project was deployed. Woman in the mirror usually stands for female vainglory, coquetry and self- assumption. After exploring the symbolic charge of the mirror through a variety of artistic representations and fairy- tale narratives, both traditional and postmodern, where the woman in the mirror was the pivotal theme, the students expressed themselves uninhibitedly and voluntarily and in the end they produced visual and textual creations. Freed from the constraints of conventional teaching and of the performance anxiety,

intrigued and engaged by both the process and the subject matter, the students responded positively during every phase, proving through their final works that they had reached a satisfactory level of self-consciousness and of understanding the factitious nature of gender roles, having adopted a more mature and objective -compared to their initial one- attitude towards gender stereotypes.

Key words: gender stereotypes, art, fairy-tales, emancipatory education, critical pedagogy

Negotiating femininity: Transformative educational practices within critical education's coordinates

This paper describes an educational intervention under the umbrella of the emancipatory- liberatory education, within the scope of the feminist literary and art criticism. It presents some transformative educational practices, which adopt a critical feminist stance in order to make students reconsider the existing, hegemonic understandings of feminine or -to be more accurate- the naturalized female standards, in order to challenge the patriarchal cultural binary oppositions.

Freire defines emancipatory or liberatory education as the one that "makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation" (Freire, 1970: 48). This can be done, by problematizing race, class and gender in the classroom and by providing the conceptual tools of emancipatory critique as a presupposition to liberate the "disenfranchised and dispossessed"(Luke, 1992: 38) and to provide equal opportunities for expressing personal choice.

Fundamental and common starting point for relevant critical approaches is the acknowledgement that men and women are essentially not free and inhabit a world full of contradictions and disproportions of power and privileges (McLaren, 1989: 166). The emancipatory- liberatory education should lead to the classroom's democratization, the students' ideological enforcement, to awareness of the historic-cultural-social character of thought and finally, to the judgment of structures as well

as the overruling of inequalities (Smith 1975/Culley et al., 1985). Acquisition of the necessary critical skills in order for the students to be able to detect the male power's consequences in our society is thought to be an essential presupposition for a future democratic society (Miller, 2007: 85).

Male dominance over females constitutes perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power, according to Millet (1970). In order to counter the tacit acceptance of patriarchal power politics, teachers should introduce gender issues for discussion in the classroom; issues which usually raise many conflicts or contentions among students and which need to be approached through transformative teaching practices.

As long as femaleness is presented as intellectual 'neutrality' or 'objectivity", a first crucial step towards the disruption of the stereotypes is consciousness raising. Our teaching strategies align with the feminist literary and art criticism's assumptions and directions.

We aim to produce understanding and resistance against the cultural constructions of femininity on works of literature and art and seek to make students comprehend the complexity of power and domination reflected on art works, which are constitutive of our social and cultural environment.

Methodological issues of the intervention

To challenge the gender stereotypes, we developed a "student-centred" pedagogical approach which enabled students to derive meaning in a connotative way through group discussion of contentious issues (Weiner, 1993: 95), using their personal experiences as a basis for learning (Middletton, 1999: 127).

Believing that students can recall knowledge from their experience, we adopted, with the relevant assistance, the Socratic *maieutics* dialogic method. We used targeted questions, urging students to discover, drawing from their own experience horizon, what we wanted them to realise, without overtly articulating or imposing it. Through

dialogic processes, the ultimate goal was not to find a right answer which would lead to a conclusion or final solution, but to approach the subject from all possible points of view and liberate it from dominant interpretations, until its imperceptible, underlying messages were revealed. We began from the simplest, almost self-evident questions and went deeper and deeper, resulting in a more careful and reflective examination of the seemingly obvious to a more essential level, beyond the superficial (Burmark, 2008: 5-25). Thus, the attempted awareness emerged and we were lead to an inventive knowledge which added to personal development and student improvement, through active participation and discreet guidance.

We established broad discussions with our students, a kind of talk that was more investigating than final-indicative (Barnes, 1992). Open type questions, which encouraged engagement and bore multiple answers was the key to this process. During the intervention teachers' role also changed (Sipe, 2008: 131-148), into that of an animator and administrator, creating an environment which enhanced responsiveness and urged students to take initiatives. Teachers gave away a part of their authority, by pretending that they, too, had questions and thus obliged students to move towards the answers and not only rely upon the teacher's ready answers.

The material on which we based our interdisciplinary intervention consisted of paintings and fairy-tales. Our rationale was firstly, that any work of art is like a symbol or a parable, which the artist understands as a passage from literal to spiritual meaning. Thus, in their turn, the recipient of the work of art is called to imitate the transgression of this material barrier of the senses and be guided towards art. Art is a language, which opens a window inside the child-creator's mind, and helps it create meaning through its experience (Epstein, Trimi, 2002: 44). **A**rt lessons are profoundly "pedagogic" and not simply a means of self expression (Chatzigeorgiou, 2000: 94). Secondly, fairy tales are the most beloved children's reads. They amuse the children, while at the same time guiding them, so that they will discover various sides in their inner self, cultivate their personality development and add meaning to their life (Bettelheim, 1977). Mythical retellings can form a field of action for the development of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1994), among which the inner-personal and the interpersonal, while children are judging the stories' content (Kaldi, 2002: 394-395).

We firmly believed that by interweaving paintings and fairy-tales, we could lead students to a deeper knowledge of themselves (Kalogirou T., 2001: 81-100), to the acquisition of an important level of self-consciousness (Hall, 2000), the improvement of their communication with other people and, most importantly, we could help them realize and negotiate the stereotypical views which are intruding in their everyday life and especially those which support gender inequality. As a result, personal balance could be promoted as well as peaceful co-existence with other people (Hickman, 2003: 86-87).

Theoretical background: a brief view of the feminist literary and art criticism

As Haraway suggests: "It has become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective – or even to insist in every circumstance upon the noun. Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute" (Haraway, 1991: 155).

So, the undertaking of a taxonomic and mapping activity within feminism and the subsequent naming and placing of an educational activity within its field is proved to be deeply problematical (Tormey and Townshend, 2006: 114), since educational practices assimilate theory, but they also have to be adjusted to the cognitive or critical literacy's goals set by each and one of them. Nevertheless, one can trace the theoretical cornerstones of our educational practice in a specific feminist phase, that of the first stage of the feminist literary and art criticism. If we understand feminism as a political position, femaleness as a matter of biology and femininity as a set of culturally defined characteristics, then this teaching approach aimed at dismantling the femininity as a cultural construct (Moi, 1989).

Even though feminist literary practices are traced back to European medieval times (Christine de Pisan), in modern times the field had been admittedly political from the onset[i] (Wittmann, 1995: 104).

This first stage, which Elaine Showalter has called "critique," undercut the universality of male-devised scripts in philosophy, art, science and social history

(Showalter, 1989) and was based on Simone de Beauvoir's insight into women's alterity. This approach proliferated analyses of the images and stereotypes of "the second sex", in other words of the depiction of fictional female characters in male-authored literature.

Feminists of the first stage, considered it as vital to combat the subservient and often negative images of women in literature and to offer women a more equal stance in society (Barry, 2002: 116).

A pivotal work of the field was Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics,* which explored the treatment of women in art and literature. It was one of the first political manifestos and theoretical signposts, as it was the first text of contemporary feminist literary criticism.. Feminists argued that these representations of women were seen to provide "role models" to men and women as to what constituted 'acceptable' versions of the "feminine". Analysis of images of women in literature unmasked such stereotypes as the "virgin and the whore", "angel and the devil", "the mother", "the submissive wife and the dominant wife" "the bitch", "the seductress", "the sex object", "the old maid" "the bluestocking", "the castrating woman", "the pioneer woman" and "the victim" (Spencer, 1983).

With a similar rationale, Linda Nochlin published in 1971 the essay "Why have there been no Great Female Artists?" where she claimed that a feminist critique of the discipline of art history was needed in order to "*pierce cultural-ideological limitations, to reveal biases and inadequacies not merely in regard to the question of women artists, but in the formulation of the crucial questions of the discipline as a whole"* (p.2).

Although critique is always a vital aspect of feminist analysis, it was quickly followed by the second stage that Showalter dubbed "gynocriticism" which focused on the recovery of female literary traditions. Concern about individual authors previously neglected or out of print invariably drew scholarly attention to the narrative of literary history with its interest in aesthetic evaluation and periodization.

Hélène Cixous (1976)[ii] and Luce Irigaray (1985) decried Western culture's valuation of a masculinity identified with rationality and vision against a femininity associated with emotionalism and embodiment. To such speculations they proposed a counter-hegemonic and empowering *écriture féminine* or *parler femme* (Showalter, 1981). During this period the previous emerged concepts of feminist critique were even more elaborated and the hierarchized binary oppositions of Western culture were further castigated.

Later on, the changes that took place in the eighties became the forerunner of the third phase of feminist criticism, which can be called the engendering of differences. This phase foregrounded disparities among women and set the stage for a questioning of the essentialist and universalizing categories that the concept of gender itself proposed. Self-reflexive theorizing about criticism undermined the term "women" upon which feminist literary practice previously depended (Gubar, 2000).

Art incentive: women representations indicative of the male cultural hegemony

The teaching intervention started with a Dimitris Mytaras' painting, called Mirror 1987 (Oil on canvas 100x50) as a pretext, which is exhibited in the Modern Greek Art Museum of Rhodes (see picture 1).

Picture 1.

Around this image, more art mirrors were entwined, for example the famous mirror from the Snow White tale, representations which in their majority have played a part in the ideological armory of male ruled society, a society which imposed the stereotype of woman vanity and made it seem natural and established. The relationship of art and aesthetic work, as well as literature representations, to stereotypes, causes **a** phenomenon of "aestheticization of everyday life" to emerge, a state in which cultural prejudices dominate, for the simple reason that they are presented with an authority, dressed in the disguise of "nature" (Eagleton, 1976: 64-101).

According to feminist criticism, the image of a woman in front of a mirror has been consolidated as the norm of female narcissism (Meyers, 2002: 114). Women are inevitably liable to the influence and consequences of the gender prejudices, due to the lack of alternative mental visualizations of female gender. In art, the woman, especially a naked woman, which is a sexual and sensual symbol, features in a long tradition of painting representations, always in the service of men-assignors, who ordered such paintings. In the artistic side of European nudes, painters and viewers-owners alike were men and the persons they used as objects-models were usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply rooted in our culture, that it can even saturate a lot of women's consciousness. This way, they do to themselves the exact same thing men do to them: they deal with their own femininity the same way a man would (Berger J., 1980: 63). The essential use of women's image has not changed. Women are depicted in a completely different way than men, because the ideal viewer is always male and the woman's image is designed in order to flatter him (Berger J., 1980: 64). The way men see women is the mirror which creates norm but at the same time sets a proviso for the essence of women identity.

A. Preparation

- **Initial understanding of the problem – brainstorming: Mirrors in real life**

- We ask children to mention where we can find mirrors in our everyday life.
- We ask them what does a mirror say when we look at it.

- We urge them to paint themselves as they see themselves in the mirror and also as they would like themselves to be.
- We ask children to take pictures of each other taking different expressions.

We then place the children's paintings and photos on a panel and ask them:

- To comment on their own, as well as their neighbor's photo in one word.

Consequently, we have different, even contradicting descriptions, which help children understand the difference in points of view and the relativity of our own judgment.

- **Exercise of thorough examination of a psychological condition**

We draw **a grid** on a board, using horizontal and vertical lines and in the first horizontal line we write the children's names, while in the outer left vertical line we write the one-word descriptions they provided.

- We ask each child to complete with a cross the squares which he/she thinks match a fellow student's[iii] characteristics and afterwards we ask pupils to stand facing one another and be each other's mirror, describing what they see.

The children's profile is being sketched, way more complex and complicated, indirectly leading to a deeper understanding of themselves and the image they radiate to other people. They realize their self-image is often incomplete or even contradicting to the image other people see.

First stage

- **Subsequently, we show some paintings featuring a woman figure and a mirror as their main themes:**

Rubens, 1616, Venus before the mirror

Titian, 1552, Venus with a mirror

Memling (1435-1494), Triptych of Earthly Vanity and Divine Salvation (front) c. 1485

Tintoretto (1518-1594), Susanna and the Elders

Mary Cassatt, 1882, Women in a Loge

P. Picasso, 1932, Girl before a mirror

- Initially, we pose a few general questions related to the artistic work, such as:

Why do you think the painter created this painting?

Does the painting include an indirect message of a wider interest or is it simply a depiction of a private moment with no further dimensions?

Can the frequency in which women are represented holding mirrors be related to a social issue?

Usually, children tend to give superficial answers and find difficulty in detecting the relations which would help us bring up the gender identities; we continue engaging them in dialogue. We study the works of art, trying to decode their ideological message.

Indicative dialogues are:

Q: what is the gender of the portrayed figures?

A: They are women.

Q: How are they depicted?

A: Either naked or smartly dressed and they are holding mirrors.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: Because women like to look at the mirror and take care of themselves.

Q: Why do you think this happens?

A: Because it's natural to them (30%) – Because beauty is a woman's power (30%) – Because they need it in order to make their men like them (50%).

- The vast majority of children think women are vain by nature and believe this characteristic to draw on the need to attract the men's interest (stereotype).

Q: Are mirrors only used by women, then?

A: Mainly.

Q: At home, do you ever see your father or brother in front of a mirror?

A: Yes.

Q: Often?

A: Yes, but…

Q: Does your mother, in the morning when she's getting ready, spend a lot of time in front of a mirror?

A: In the morning we are always in a hurry. She doesn't spend much time.

Q: When does she spend time in front of a mirror, then?

A: When she's going out.

Q: Does your father not groom himself when he's going out?

A: Of course he does.
Q: Don't you think that it is not true that women spend more time in front of mirrors, then? That maybe the images we see construct a reality, which we are taking for granted and assume is objective?
A: I guess so (a small doubt is expressed, but they are beginning to accept it).

- This dialogue causes a shift in their initial confidence and they are beginning to look at the female vanity issue more objectively and multidimensionally.

Q: What is the age of the depicted women?
A: Young, more or less. In their 20s or 30s.
Q: Why is that? Are only young women coquettish?
A: No. Older women might be even more, as they are more concerned by their appearance as they grow older.
Q: Why do you think are older women not portrayed?
A: Because they are ugly.
Q: When is a woman considered beautiful?
A: When she is young, curvy, nicely dressed and takes care of herself.
Q: Is beauty important for women?
A: Yes, very important.
Q: Why?
A: It helps them find a man to marry, or achieve their goals in general. For example to win a beauty contest, become models or find a job.
Q: Are you saying that women use their beauty as a weapon in order to achieve various goals?
A: Yes.
Q: Who do you think decides on a woman's fate and the fulfillment of her goals?
A: Men, who take decisions.

- This way the stereotype emerges that women have to take care of their beauty, which they use as a means to achieve their goals, as well as the idea that older women are by definition ugly, since they cannot meet the invariable stereotype of youth.

Q: What is the gender of the artists?
A: Mostly men.
Q: Who do you think might have bought or ordered those paintings?
A: Probably men, because women wouldn't order a nude.
Q: Do you think that maybe, after all, the above paintings are created from men and are addressed to men, who construct a fictional female image and then use it among them?
A: It seems so.

- **Is the conclusion drawn** that women are depicted according to men determination, which transfixes them in the idea of a beautiful, young, vain, flirtatious woman and excludes other kinds of representations?

Q: What is the gender of most painters in general?
A: Male.
Q: Have you ever wondered why we don't see many women painters?
A: Because women rarely become great artists. It is usually men who get all the distinctions.
Q: Would you say that men are better by nature, then?
A: It seems so.
Q: What would you say art is? How does one become a great artist?
A: It is an inherent capacity to express oneself through art, in a way that can connect to the audience, which admits the work of art's value.
Q: Do you think that art is only an inherent talent? Does knowledge not play any part in it?
A: Maybe not. You have to know things.
Q: What kind of things?
A: Techniques.
Q: Then it is a matter of knowledge, too?
A: Yes.
Q: Did women always have free access to this –or other- kind of knowledge? What was their social position?
A: I guess they were usually confined into their houses, mostly.

Q: Would you say then, that their life conditions kept them away from knowledge as well as the official academies and the circles which promote art?
A: Probably.
Q: Does this not prove that women are falling behind in the field of art, but only because they could not participate in it due to their social exclusion?
A: Yes.

- The conclusion is drawn that we tend to superficially admit, without judging them, various positions which are based in stereotypical views on the alleged female inferiority, while a more careful examination would prove that most of the times there is a reason for the social inequality and the lack of female presence in some fields. Art, especially high art, involves a cohesive language, either reliant or independent of the conventions of its time and the accepted frames, which are in any case a result of education and exercise, learning and experimenting. In a society which confined women inside the household, in very strict and unswerving rules, it is self-evident that women were excluded from art.

Second stage of the process – Theoretical analysis

Magical fairy tales' course of evolution and their transformations: From the patriarchic speech to feminist re-tellings

From the initial oral way of transmitting, by talented narrators, through a whole ritual which gave meaning to the community life and a primary material drawn from experience, up to their imprinting, fairy tales have changed their social role, as well as their orientation. As a new social class took over them, it categorized them, adjusted them to fit various occasions especially the specifications of court nobility and the upcoming bourgeois morals (Zipes, 1983: 14). Two Italian writers (Straparola and Giambattista) were the pioneers, followed by several French authors, who set the foundation for Europe's literary fairy-tale tradition (Zipes, 1989: 1-15). "Fairy-tales are based on the willful suspension of our disbelief", said Christina Bacchilega (1999: 28), referring to Samuel Taylor's Coleridge famous saying. An equally standard element of the fairy-tale genre, despite its multi-formity and the subject variety, was that it used to enforce the patriarchic symbolic order of things, imposing an

unyielding approach to the notion of sexuality and gender roles (Zipes, Jack, 1994: 74).

As we observe the genre of fairy-tale moving towards the 20th and 21st centuries, we realize that readers are not willing any more to suspend their disbelief. They pose new questions, which lead to the gradual restructuring of the genre, regarding the magical element, as well as gender identities. A common practice of contemporary re-tellings is the reduction, even the exclusion of the magical element, in the name of a better realism, or a more intense ambivalence, but also the reversing of roles, so that women are no longer passive and hesitant, but powerful and contemplating. The elimination of magic is not a modern day phenomenon, but can be dated back to the era of Grimm Brothers, according to German critic Klaus Doderer in his *Reisen in Erdachtes Land* (120) (1998, Munchen: Iudicium), who compared different editions of *Children's and Household Tales*, among which the 1810 Olenberger manuscript and detected several important differences.[iv]

The reversion of gender roles, however, is a phenomenon born in our own time, a child of feminist quest and questioning.

The reason for a fairy-tale's retelling is the creation of a new text, which will have absorbed the author's critical and creative thought while at the same time corresponding to the readership's change in needs, values and preferences (Zipes, 1994: 9).

If traditional fairy-tales, then, were supposed to mark the natural-eternal state of things, contemporary post-fairy-tales are demonstrating the artificial and constructed nature of this truth, through a gender defined and over-codificated speech. In particular, they are enhancing Simone de Beauvoir's famous saying, that one is not born a woman, but becomes one (1973: 301).

Women authors have systematically tried to re-write traditional fairy-tale and re-assign its meaning, expressing their rejection of imposed and naturalized masculine oppression (Joosen, 2007: 228).

However, it has been noted, that children not only not show much excitement reading alternative post-fairy-tales, which shake authorities and redefine gender roles, but express also disbelief towards them and are not very willing to read them (Oikonomidou, 2000: 51). In our teaching intervention, we will try to critically explore such post-fairy-tale narratives, together with the starting point text of Snow White –which is associated to the relative issue of women and mirror- in order to help children gradually realize the purpose of their social function.

Variants of the Snow White fairy-tale and contemporary critical approaches.

Famous Snow White (AT709)[v] has thousands of oral variations, while the oldest written one was the variant of Giambattista Basile at 1634-6. These come from Europe, as well as Asia Minor, Africa and America (Jones, 1993: 14), and have many differences in their plot, such as the ways the wicked step-mother attacks Snow White, to where and to whom the heroine finds refuge (assassins, giants, thieves, fairies), etc. Despite their obvious differences, some patterns remain structural to all stories, including Snow White's innocence and the jealous older woman hunt (Bacchilega, 1999: 31). From all those interpretations Snow White has been suffered, we chose the most important, and in most of them the themes of female development and female jealousy are common ground.

Bruno Bettelheim (1977: 194-215) argues that the particular fairy-tale indicates the daughter's successful discharge from the oedipal complex, N.J. Girardot (1977: 274-300) focuses on Snow White's rite de passage to adulthood, Steve Swann Jones believes the fairy-tale is a metaphorical embodiment of a young woman's problems, while Shuli Barzilai (1990: 515-534) is referring to Snow White's tale as the "story of a mother who could not grow up and a daughter who had to" (534). Finally, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979) emphasize the constraints posed to women by the patriarchic society, as well as the manichaic-stereotypic distinction between woman-angel and monstrous woman. Our teaching intervention is based on this interpretation.

	*Favorite Fairy Tales.* (1885) Compiled (Cooper Edens and Harold Darling. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1991 (illustrations W.C. Drupsteen)
	*My Pop-Up Book of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.* Illus. Anne Grahame Johnstone. London: Deans International, 1983.

Grimm brothers' Snow White and its differences from the prevailing Disney version

Children easily move on from the mirror of the visual performances to the most famous fairy-tale mirror, that of Snow White's evil stepmother. Searching into the children's knowledge regarding the fairy tale of Snow White, we realize that, with no exception, they are all familiar with the Disney version. That's why we have to explain to them that this version is no more than a modern rendition, which significantly diverges from the original text. Subsequently, we compare the two versions, locate the differences between the original and the reworking and thus it becomes apparent that Disney has manipulated the meaning of the fairy tale, praising male dominance and supremacy, which determines the female fate.

Specifically:

In Disney, the prince appears at the beginning of the story, singing a love song about his devotion to Snow White, whereas in the original version he only appears at the end and plays a secondary role. In the film, it is the prince that the stepmother sees and is consequently consumed by blind jealousy for the good luck of Snow White, an element which is completely absent from the fairy tale. The dwarves in the initial narration have a negligent role, whereas in Disney they are protagonists. They have names, individual personalities and they make the film more lively. When Snow White finds refuge in their cottage –in the Grimms' version- she pleads with them to allow her to stay in return for the cleaning services she offers, while in Disney she takes the initiative on her own during their absence, demonstrating zeal and affirming the absolute acceptance-submission of her domestic role (Zipes, 1994: 89). Finally, in the Grimms version, Snow White wakes from her deathly sleep when one of the dwarfs carrying her glass coffin trips, whereas in Disney the prince's kiss becomes the antidote to the poisoned apple.

During the analysis, the deliberate distortion of the initial fairy tale becomes apparent and in these changes the children realize the intention to present the male role – through the dwarves, but mainly through the prince- as decisive for the female fate.

The voice of the mirror or the assertion of male domination

The magic mirror was a talking object supervising the whole realm ruled by Snow White's father. The mirror plays a part of critical importance, as it merges the physical with the ideological, reinforcing the latter, since its judgment is presented as indubitable and unswerving.

Whose voice do we hear from inside the mirror, though? Bettelheim claims it is the voice of the daughter challenging the mother; Girardot calls it the voice of truth, Barzilai the voice of the mother traumatically experiencing the fact that her daughter has surpassed her and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar maintain it is the voice of the father.

We ask the children, if they were to direct a theatre play, who would they would choose to voice the predication of the mirror.

All of them reply they would prefer a male voice.

In order to support their intuitive estimation we present several versions of the fairy tale, which are in accordance with their opinion.

For example, in an Italian version (Bella Venezia), a female inn-keeper asks male passers-by to appraise her beauty (Calvino, 1980: 395-398), while in another version: Snow Bella (Louisiana), a travelling salesman gives the stepmother the magic mirror as well as the tools with which she will try to destroy Snow White (Carol, 1983: 579-646).

In the majority of modern post-fairy-tale versions, the mirror, through various strategies, loses its magical dimension and is replaced by other means fulfilling the same goal.

We give children certain relevant meta-narrations of the fairy tale and we ask them to observe the voice of the mirror and its gender.

In Fiona French's *Snow White in New York*, for example, "The New York Mirror" newspaper undertakes the role of judge and beauty appraiser of women's faces, via its front-page titles. One day, it features the photograph of the queen with the subtitle "the most elegant woman in the kingdom" and the other, that of Snow White, following the discovery that she is alive and well. The text accompanying the photograph is in a text box resembling the frame of a mirror, thus creating intertextual and visual ties with the original fairy-tale. The power of the Press, a male force, is the disguised voice of the man-appraiser of female beauty and the primary cause of female vanity.

In other contemporary fairy tales, the voice of the mirror is integrated in one of the characters in the story, in yet another effort to strip the original narration of its magical elements.

In Adèle Geras' book, *Pictures of the Night*, the stepmother's hairdresser, Monsieur Armand, confirms the irresistibility of her beauty, by holding up a mirror, a typical instrument of his profession. By placing it in front of his customers' faces he talks to them about their image, substituting its magical function.

In Tracey Lynn's version, *Snow*, a young manservant holds up the mirror and tells the queen she is the prettiest in the world, whereas in Emma Donoghue's version, *The Tale of the Apple*, it is the father that compares the beauty of his wife to that of his daughter, when he catches them in a tender moment of female complicity and confidence, lying in a sea of velvet and lace. "Two such beautiful women, he said, have never before been found together in the same bed. But who is the prettiest?" – And he continues "how can I judge two such beauties?" "The two women then looked into each other's eyes, and their eyes were like mirrors facing each other, creating a long tunnel of reflections, unfathomably deep"[vi]. The father thus establishes **female competitiveness**[vii], which matches the interpretation of the fairy tale by Sarah Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In their study (1979), they advocate that the mirror represents the voice of the patriarch, which is the primary cause of female rivalry, always vying for his favor[viii].

After having concluded that in many modern versions the voice of the mirror is transposed into some kind of symbol of male domination, or is embodied we ask the girls:

> Q: Whose opinion regarding your appearance is more important for you: that of a girlfriend or that of a boy?
> A vast majority admits that the opinion of a boy they like is more important.
> Q: How do boys usually want you to be?
> A: Sexy and capricious. Boys like silly girls.
>
> Afterwards, we ask the boys:
> Q: What do you notice and appreciate in a girl?
> A: Beauty (90%) / intelligence (10%).
> Q: What do you mean by beauty?
> A: To be curvy (60%), to be nicely dressed (10%), to be mysterious (30%).

These brief conversations reinforce the stereotypes which encage women in the libidinous instincts of men.

Third stage – production of ideas and implementation

We ask children to reverse the established image of gender roles and draw or create a collage of male figures in front of mirrors and female figures in dynamic roles.

We ask children to work together in order to compose their own version of the fairy tale with dynamic heroines and weak men, or to take up the narration of the fairy tale of Snow White from where it ends, introducing reverse roles.

General conclusions from the implementation of the first stage of the process

From the first stage of the implementation we reach the conclusion that we tend to accept anything that looks natural as equally real.

A crucial point which became apparent is the objectification (Britain et al., 2005: 188) of the female body through images and other social practices (e.g. advertising) and how these affect and determine the behavior of women (McKinley et al. 1996: 181-215). A woman's value has been equated with beauty, which in turn has been identified with elegance, coquetry and youth. A woman is considered beautiful in her youth, but repulsive in her old age. Most painted images of women depict them at a young age, as sexual objects of male desire. The woman in front of the mirror is always young and narcissistically self-admiring. This cliché is favored by our culture.

By having equated her value with the ability to procreate (which presupposes sexuality), the woman, when no longer naturally fertile, is also considered socially obsolete. On the contrary, a man in his 50s in considered to be in his prime.

The obvious physical deterioration brought on by old age frightens and appalls society, which tries to protect itself from ugliness and death, by avoiding representations of women at an older age.

The female nude has been repeatedly painted for the pleasure of men who, hypocritically reversing the terms and transferring the essence, laid blame on woman herself and, having bound her to a mirror, condemned her vanity on an alleged moral basis. The main protagonist, however, is never painted; it is the viewer facing the image, and this is no other than the male gender, for the benefit of which the painting was created in the first place (Berger, 1980: 50-54).

Moreover, the limited presence of women in science or art is interpreted as proof of their lack of ability. The domination of the western, white man leads to a series of mental distortions that alter historic truth (Nochlin, 1988: 145-176).

Finally, the question rises why are there no great women artists, scientists, philosophers, mathematicians etc. Does this perchance prove that women are by nature incapable for greatness and distinction?

Rather than arguing in favor of women's artistry, by mentioning random examples of women whose worth has indeed been overlooked or, on the other hand, raising an insubstantial argument regarding the particularities of "female" art, which both constitute vain attempts to put forth a defensive line of arguments, the right thing to do would be to approach the issue under a different light.

In order to answer the question, we must acknowledge the degree to which reality is tainted by the phrasing of such a question. Perhaps, after all, we should re-wonder on the function of institutions, the way of producing academic knowledge and the expediencies served and try to understand the position of woman in this context.

Because art is not only the spontaneous expression of an emotive experience, or the translation of private life into visual terms, nor is the great artist exclusively luminous and charismatic, but art presupposes specific knowledge, as well as institutions that establish it.

Conclusions from the second stage

From this phase of the procedure we are led to the confirmation of the conclusions we arrived at during the first stage. To have been born a woman means equally to have been predetermined to function in a definite and limited range under the supervision of men. The female physical self-perception is defined by the male dominating viewpoint. Women, by putting emphasis on physical attractiveness and by adhering to a suffocating and simultaneously high standard of beauty, are self-demoted and unconsciously accept their submissive social role.

A woman must always observe herself. The inspector within her ego is male. She thus transmutes herself into an object to be viewed, namely an exhibit.

Furthermore, the patriarchal word has also corroded, among others, the oral fairy tales, which were delivered to us after a process of purgation and adaptation to the morality of the prevalent class and the male viewpoint, from the popular storytellers (Perrault-Grimm), as well as their successors (Disney). Finally, the feministic modern adaptations reveal the cultural distortion of woman through the quasi physicalized context of classical fairy tales and help us debate social prejudices and the indiscernible ways in which they are further enhanced.

Conclusions from the third stage

Although the process has a playful character and raises objections and comments, it is precisely for this reason that we emphasize to children and especially boys, in case they react, that this happens because they are not used to being exposed to such reversed images. They thus realize that several cultural products, like painting and fairy tales, transmit and strengthen the traditional gender roles and are hence significantly responsible for the pre-constructed-prejudiced opinions which we often adopt and which eventually undermine the mutual understanding and harmonious gender coexistence.

In general, we consider that this specific educational intervention satisfactorily achieved its aims, which, as defined from the beginning, were the students' deeper acquaintance with themselves, the acquisition of an important level of self-knowledge and the improvement of their communication with others. The main and foremost goal, the consciousness raising concerning gender stereotypes in order to negotiate the stereotypical perceptions that invade their daily lives, was also achieved. The students came to realize that subjectivity is constructed through the institutional dispositions of power relations, as well as through fictional conventions and artistic representations. They became aware of the socially and culturally devised angles of viewing femininity, controlled and manipulated by the dominant patriarchal viewpoint and more eager and competent to negotiate and even subvert them.

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[i] See the 1902 publication, *Die Antifeministen,* by Hedwig Dohm.

[ii] In "The Laugh of the Medusa" Hélène Cixous began by using Derrida's notion binary oppositions to censure Western culture 's identification of masculinity with activity, rationality, culture and logos and of femininity with passivity, sensitivity, nature and pathos.

[iii] At this point we use a variant of the Repertory Grid of the George Kelly Personal Construct Psychology (1955). This way we can detect the specific way in which each child perceives their surroundings, and also help children explore and better understand themselves.

[iv] An explanation of the gradual elimination of the magical element in fairy-tales is the fact that they are considered allegorical narrations, where magical circumstances are nothing more than symbolic representations of realistic-existing conditions. Socio-historic, as well as psychoanalytic criticism, is searching for concealed symbolical meaning behind magical objects.

[v] According to Aarne-Thompson classification system.

[vi] Author's paraphrase.

[vii] Female competitiveness over beauty had been established by the myth of the Apple of Discord (Berger, 1972: 52)

[viii] In other versions, even more realistic, the mirror survives simply as an object-tool offered to those who look into it for contemplation. The questions and answers are both supplied by the people themselves, while the mirror is silent. Characteristically, in Róisín Sheerin's version, it is clearly stated "I obtain the greatest satisfaction from my mirror, even if it just reflects my own opinions. I consulted it with regards to Snow White, I told it I decided to rid myself of her and never to be preoccupied with her again. Then I asked it if I am becoming too harsh and it reminded me that I was also abrupt and rebellious when I was young". Here the mirror provides the occasion for the queen to develop an internal dialogue.