If the Shoe Fits…
The Evolution of the Cinderella Story

The story of Cinderella is known around the world and through the ages. This story of victimization, good conquering evil, final justice and a little bit of supernatural power have captivated audiences for generations. As we continue our fascination with this tale it has evolved into numerous formats, cultural variations, and styles in the re-telling. Most people link the original story of Cinderella to an Italian tale from around 1634, but the first recorded story bearing this plot originated in China. The story appeared in the Miscellaneous Record of Yu Yang, from the T’ang dynasty (618-907 A.D.) The author was Tuan Ch’eng-Shih. Cinderella made her way across China, through Europe, to the America’s and into our hearts.

Using a collection of ten picture books all with the Cinderella theme, I will analyze how the story has changed over time in terms of characters, setting, and style. The purpose of this analysis is to better understand how stories reflect their society and culture and how one simple plot can be transformed into multiple variations. This would be an excellent source for a writing teacher, as it would demonstrate how the students could create variations of their own stories. Two of the books were in my own personal collection and the other eight were from my school library. All of these titles are popular with young students as the fascination with Cinderella continues.

Bibliography:


This story predates the earliest known European version by almost a thousand years but they share many of the same elements. The characters are an evil stepmother and a stepsister, a king searching for a wife, a fairy Godmother, and a mistreated poor girl named Yeh-Shen. This story also contains a magic fish for which Yeh-Shen cares for by sharing her meager portions of food. When the stepmother tricks the fish and then kills it the reader feels even more sympathy for Yeh-Shen. Through the bones of the fish Yeh-Shen gets food and was able to go to the spring festival but her fun is cut short when she is almost recognized by her stepmother. As she flees she loses one golden slipper. The slipper is
placed in the pavilion for all to try on but Yeh-Shen must do so only late at night. When the prince catches her and sees her he falls in love and they marry at once. The evil stepmother and stepsister are crushed to death by a shower of stones.


By the time the Chinese version of the story made it to France it contained forgiveness at the end for the stepmother and stepsisters and even a home in the palace and husbands. This version of the story contains the Caldecott winning art of Marcia Brown to bring the story to life. There are two stepsisters that mistreat Cinderella, a fairy Godmother that turns ordinary things such as mice and pumpkins into carriages, horses, a coachman and a footman. She provides everything Cinderella needs but restricts her to stay only until midnight. She goes to the ball twice in this story and drops the glass slipper on the second visit. The Prince searches the kingdom for Cinderella using the glass slipper as the key to her identity. Upon his visit to her home, Cinderella appears with the matching slipper and once the shoe fits she is once again turned into the beautiful woman he met at the ball. They move to the palace and all live happily ever after.


In this version of Cinderella, the elements are decidedly Egyptian. The main character is Rhodopis, a Greek slave, who is scorned by the Egyptians because of her different appearance. Although there are no stepsisters, there is a definite distinction made of the servant girls and Rhodopis the slave. She is kind to the animals and is favored upon by her master who buys her a pair of dainty red slippers. This only added to the jealousy of the servant girls and they happily left her as they sailed down the Nile to the Pharaoh’s feast. When a falcon steals one of her slippers and delivers it to the Pharaoh he took it as a sign from the gods and searched for the owner. Finally, he finds Rhodopis hiding in the rushes and makes her try it on. The story ends as they sail away on the royal barge.


In this whimsical animal version of the Cinderella story an almost satirical tone presents the story. This version, based on the Perrault story, has all the traditional cast of characters except they are penguins. Her Great Fairy Penguin helps to get Cinderella to the ball via a pumpkin coach and gives her pretty and delicate glass flippers. She must leave by midnight so she rushes off leaving her flipper behind. When the prince arrives at the house to try on the flipper the stepsisters throw Cinderella down into the cellar accidentally catching her foot in
the door. During a tussle between the stepsisters they toss the glass flipper and it lands smack on Cinderella’s foot still stuck in the cellar door. They were married the next day and lived happily ever after.


This Cinderella tale from Algonquin Indian folklore demonstrates how this story has crossed many cultures. The prince in this story is an invisible being that only can be seen by his sister or the one who can marry him. There are three sisters and while two are mean and cruel one is forced to sit by the fire until her hands and face are scarred and burned. This ugliness made her ashamed. The two sisters dressed in their finest but could not pass the test to see the invisible being. The youngest had nothing beautiful left to wear so she made her own necklace and clothes and the villagers laughed at her. But the rough-faced girl kept walking and she saw a face in the beauty of nature. When she had passed the test of the invisible being she was taken into the great wigwam and given the finest robes and necklace and told to bathe in the lake. The water healed her skin and face and she was beautiful again but most of all she was beautiful in her heart. They married and lived together in “great gladness.”


This anthology of stories contains the Disney version of Cinderella. This version is much like the Perrault version but adds more dialogue and drama as well as talking mice, an evil cat, friendly birds, and a gentle old hound dog. In this version, the stepmother realizes that Cinderella is the one they are looking for and locks her away when the Grand Duke arrives. With the help of her animal friends Cinderella escapes just in time. The two stepsisters are exceptionally mean to Cinderella in this version and even destroy the dress she first planned to wear to the ball. Disney also gave the characters names and the fairy Godmother a bewitching spell, bibbidi-bobbidi-boo.


This version of Cinderella with a Korean twist tells the story of Pear Blossom, who gains a stepmother and stepsister after her mother’s death when the town matchmaker makes a match for her father. The stepmother is cruel and forces Pear Blossom to work hard and dress in rags. Her stepmother begins challenging Pear Blossom with impossible tasks. When she finally asks who can help a giant frog appears and plays a trick on her evil stepsister. As the stepmother increases the hardship, Pear Blossom calls on the help of sparrows, and then an ox. When she fled from the festival she left a sandal behind for the magistrate
who finds her and falls in love with her beauty. In the spring they marry and live happily ever after with her father’s blessing.


This modern feminist twist to the traditional version reads much like a parody of the old tale. Cinder Edna lives next door to Cinderella but is not content with sitting in the cinders, bemoaning her fate, she mows yards and it much more resourceful. Cinder Edna is not beautiful; she took the bus to the ball and put a dress on layaway, unlike Cinderella who relied on the fairy Godmother everything. The prince is boorish but his younger brother, Rupert, is the life of the party. Cinder Edna must leave by midnight because that is when the busses stop running. They leave behind a glass slipper and a brown loafer. Cinderella is found in the traditional way but Rupert found Edna because she was the only one who could name fifteen different kinds of tuna casserole. Cinderella got her prince a life of boring speeches, and lonely evenings while Edna ended up in a small cottage with solar heating, recycling, and orphaned kittens, and lived happily ever after.


This version of Cinderella has a western flavor full of fun phrases. The stepmother is the orneriest woman west of the Mississippi who made sweet Cindy Ellen do all the dirty work on the ranch. The two stepsisters didn’t do a lick of work all day. Cindy Ellen wants to go to the big rodeo and square dance but not without the help of her pistol totin’ Godmother who shoots her up a white Stetson, buckskin chaps and diamond spurs. At the rodeo, Cindy is full of her godmother’s gift of gumption and she road to the dance in a stagecoach pulled by six dappled horses. As she darted away she left her diamond spur. When the spur fit on Cindy Ellen the Godmother yelled, “yee haw!” Then Cindy Ellen and Joe Prince got hitched and lived happily ever after on the ranch. The stepsister’s horrible fate was to marry city slickers.


With a touch of British flair, this version is told from the point of view of a little girl named Diamante who loves the story of Cinderella so much that she wants to be a fairy godmother. She decides to turn her dog Ruff into Ruff-erella and teach her all the girlish graces. But when Rufferella becomes the life of the party Diamante isn’t sure she has done the right thing. It is the Queen herself that teaches Diamante and Rufferella that it is better to be yourself. This story, although based on the original Cinderella story has no glass slipper, no prince and no evil stepsisters. There is a comical scene at the Queen’s party however, and everyone does live happily ever after.

Without looking at the illustrations you would think this was the original Perrault version except for the references to the fact that all the characters are dogs. This twist on the traditional tail adds humor to the story complete with evil stepsisters, a handsome prince and glass slippers. The story has an eighteenth century feel integrated with doggy humor.

**Characters:**

The main character in all of these stories is a young girl faced with challenging circumstances. The name of the character is most often Cinderella but varies based on the theme of the story. In most of the stories, Cinderella is saved from her horrible fate by some magical being, usually a fairy godmother, and lives happily ever after with her prince. The character of Cinderella did experience some evolution through time. In the later versions Cinderella was an Egyptian slave, a penguin, an Indian maiden, a singing Cinderella, a feminist, a Korean girl, a rancher, and a dog. What other story has experienced so many character transformations? The fairy godmother became a fish, a falcon, a great fairy penguin, a giant frog, a pistol totin’ granny, and a young British girl. The interaction between the magical help and the main character also varied from story to story. Not all of the stories contained evil stepsisters and an evil stepmother that mistreated our main character. Other variations were servant girls, or real sisters. The Prince was portrayed as a Pharaoh, an invisible being, a boring workaholic, a magistrate, and a rancher.

**Setting:**

The setting of these stories has also experienced quite an evolution. From the castle to the royal barge, the igloo, the village, the solar heated cottage, the pavilion, and the rodeo. The setting is essential to determine the theme of the various stories. Many countries are also represented, China, France, Egypt, the South Pole, Early America, Korea, Western America, and Britain. Even locations varied from the suburbs, the wilderness, the square dance, and the cellar. Whatever the setting, the stories have the familiar feel of the traditional Cinderella. The earlier stories typically always found Cinderella dreaming of her castle but the more modern versions have experimented with a number of unusual and unique settings.
**Style:**

Each of the stories carries a unique style that has changed over time. Reading *Yeh-Shen*, the readers can feel a tone that takes you back to ancient China. The original Chinese writing is included in the book to capture the spirit of this culture. The ending with the death of the stepmother and stepsisters is unique to an earlier more barbaric time. The Perrault version has had the greatest influence on the majority of the books and has a definite European, middle ages flair. The more recent versions contain much more humor in the style and the illustrations. From the dramatic helping animals in the Disney version to the dog and penguin versions, it is evident that the effort is to appeal to modern audiences. The political correctness of the Indian, Korean, and Egyptian versions demonstrates the universality of the story. The feminist version in *Cinder Edna* is a modern response to the old story of rescue the victim. The Wild western version illustrates that even old stories can find new voices and dialects. *Rufferella* demonstrates the influence of an old story and incorporates a lesson to be learned. These variations in style show the depth and diversity this single story can take.

**Summary:**

As I read through each of these stories the old quote, “the more things change the more they remain the same,” kept coming to mind. We continue to re-write the story of Cinderella in order to keep it alive, appeal to all audiences and keep the good guys winning. I believe this is the universal lesson of the story. That good will conquer evil, one way or another, in the end. And we can always hope that if we are good we will live happily ever after……

If I were to begin again, I might have tried to find books that reflected a broader span of time. I think this would have given me an even better evolutionary comparison. I would like to continue to gather and read Cinderella books and create a storytelling program with this theme. I was amazed at how truly unique the stories seemed even though the central story was very recognizable.

I have always loved the story of Cinderella and now I have broadened my awareness of this theme and appreciate it all the more.