

3690: A Journal of First-Year Student Research Writing

Volume 2012

Article 3

2012

Happily Never After

Edward Buell

St. John Fisher College, ebuell_no@sjfc.edu

[How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/journal3690>

Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Buell, Edward (2012) "Happily Never After," *3690: A Journal of First-Year Student Research Writing*: Vol. 2012 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/journal3690/vol2012/iss1/3>

This document is posted at <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/journal3690/vol2012/iss1/3> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.

Happily Never After

Abstract

Overview: “And they lived happily ever after... the end.” The typical ending to traditional fairytales forces one to wonder, what happens after the wedding bells cease to ring? What if things change and the typically rushed marriages do not pan out, or the spouse you thought you knew was not who you thought they were? The “Bluebeard” tale type presents an unusual fairytale that rarely gets attention because it contrasts the “norm” of the commonplace tale. Bluebeard, a serial murderer, lures maidens with his wealth but fails to conceal his dark past in his chamber of death. Clearly the story takes place after the marriage has occurred, the reader obtains a perspective that is rarely exposed in fairytales and that reveals the implications of the women’s inability to choose a suitor. By looking at the combination of the women’s motives and Bluebeard’s actions, we can see the emphasis in society on wealth and luxury as a precursor to marriage. This can have deadly consequences because the women’s choice of lavish belongings over true love and compatibility, leads to loss of innocence, subordination, and inability to escape demeaning gender roles.

The entire institution of marriage runs counter to female independence. Many women today are aware of this but still buy into the marriage ideal. As Bergoffen explains, men become the guardian of women’s reproductive and professional labors and control sexual relationships to benefit their needs. Therefore, the system of marriage keeps women completely emotionally and physically at the mercy and duty of their male counterpart. Women are destined for marriage while men are destined for much more; men strive for power, wealth, and dominance over others (20). Dismissing women’s dreams in order to make way for male supremacy creates ideals that women are intended to mold themselves into regardless of how much of their self-worth they lose along the way. During the time period of Perrault’s version of Bluebeard’s time, the seventeenth century, women were meant to be seen and not heard. This mentality fueled the patriarchal society and had been present for hundreds of years, dating back to before the creation of this tale type. This ideal was relevant to the time period of the “Bluebeard” tales. During this time period marriages were arranged and dowries were paid to families in exchange for wives, thus objectifying women. Willing or not women entered marriages with no knowledge of the man she was being assigned to for life. These ideals belittle women to mere pieces of meat for males to pick from and devour, Bluebeard’s specialty.

Keywords

Writing

Edward Buell

Happily Never After

“And they lived happily ever after... the end.” The typical ending to traditional fairytales forces one to wonder, what happens after the wedding bells cease to ring? What if things change and the typically rushed marriages do not pan out, or the spouse you thought you knew was not who you thought they were? The “Bluebeard” tale type presents an unusual fairytale that rarely gets attention because it contrasts the “norm” of the commonplace tale. Bluebeard, a serial murderer, lures maidens with his wealth but fails to conceal his dark past in his chamber of death. Clearly the story takes place after the marriage has occurred, the reader obtains a perspective that is rarely exposed in fairytales and that reveals the implications of the women’s inability to choose a suitor. By looking at the combination of the women’s motives and Bluebeard’s actions, we can see the emphasis in society on wealth and luxury as a precursor to marriage. This can have deadly consequences because the women’s choice of lavish belongings over true love and compatibility, leads to loss of innocence, subordination, and inability to escape demeaning gender roles.

The entire institution of marriage runs counter to female independence. Many women today are aware of this but still buy into the marriage ideal. As Bergoffen explains, men become the guardian of women’s reproductive and professional labors and control sexual relationships to benefit their needs. Therefore, the system of marriage keeps women completely emotionally and physically at the mercy and duty of their male counterpart. Women are destined for marriage while men are destined for much more; men strive for power, wealth, and dominance over others (20). Dismissing women’s dreams in order to make way for male supremacy creates ideals that women are intended to mold themselves into regardless of how much of their self-worth they lose along the way. During the time period of Perrault’s version of Bluebeard’s time, the seventeenth century, women were meant to be seen and not heard. This mentality fueled the patriarchal society and had been present for hundreds of years, dating back to before the creation of this tale type. This ideal was relevant to the time period of the “Bluebeard” tales. During this time period marriages were arranged and dowries were paid to families in exchange for wives, thus objectifying women. Willing or not women entered marriages with no knowledge of the man she was being assigned to for life. These ideals belittle women to mere pieces of meat for males to pick from and devour, Bluebeard’s specialty.

The often idolized institution of marriage for women in fairytales is reinvented in the “Bluebeard” fairytales. In the Bluebeard fairytale type, Bluebeard is a wealthy man wearing a frightening blue beard. He uses his possessions to distract women from his ghastly personality and suspicious history regarding the disappearances of his previous wives. Each woman gives in to temptation, marries Bluebeard under the impression of financial support and a happy life until they are given a test of loyalty. Bluebeard gives each wife the keys to all doors in the house, granting them full access to his home except for one special room. In each tale, the wives disobey their husband’s commands and in doing so, seal their fate. Bluebeard discovers the act of disobedience and kills them, hanging them amongst the corpses in his forbidden chamber. The last wife manages to escape punishment and Bluebeard is killed as part of her escape. There are many variations of this tale type. Of these tales, the versions by Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm the most familiar. I will discuss their different approaches to the theme of marriage in this tale type.

The women in Perrault’s tale are reluctant to wed the mysterious suitor but are forced through family obligations. Families forced their daughters into marriage and it was embedded in a woman’s mind that having a wedding was her ultimate goal in life. Marriage was seen as an instrument for financial gain rather than a means to find a soul mate. These often forced matrimony reveals that marriage was an institution that condemns women to a fate similar to prostitution. They are selling themselves to a man in exchange for wealth and protection. In the tale, more potent than reluctance is the apparent fear towards Bluebeard. There are many women who run in fright from the ugly man and his blue beard. As Marina Warner explains, it is the blueness of his beard that makes the women so fearful. She elaborates by saying that the blueness makes him seem as if he is going against human nature by producing something so revolting. Furthermore, she says that it is not that he dyes his beard to make him look this way, but it is that he can create something so hideous on his own (Warner 124). In Perrault’s tale both sisters fight back and forth because neither wants to be forced into marriage with such a grotesque creature. The hideous Bluebeard character attempts to woo his bride-to-be by enticing them with his wealth and lavish belongings. In this version of the tale, the fanciness of Bluebeard’s home and the magnitude of riches is enough to make them believing he was a “fine fellow” (Perrault 144). Perrault focuses heavily on these possessions. He illustrates the numerous “tapestries,” “caskets” for jewels, and brilliant looking glasses (145). Clearly, the emphasis on material goods overrides the list of negative qualities of Bluebeard’s character.

Soon after the marriage, Bluebeard is forced away from home on a business trip and the beginnings of a “happy” marriage begin to unravel. Once Bluebeard leaves the homestead, friends and neighbors flock to the house to see more of its glory. They were too frightened to visit when he was home because of Bluebeard’s appearance. When describing the elation of the guests, Perrault uses terms such as “splendid,” “magnificent,” and “beauty” (145). Once again, having numerous rooms and frivolous belongings coincides with an enthusiastic, approving vocabulary. These connections establish at a young age create the desire for material goods rather than emotional bonds, superficial play things rather than true love.

Emphasis on wealth can teach the reader that those who jump into relationships for the wrong reasons can meet a terrible fate completely unpredicted. Although this tale is a much more extreme version of marriage, it follows the same pattern as most others: strangers marry strangers. No one truly knows the person they are marrying; like the prince who never knows the damsel in distress beyond her beauty. It seems that the most important factors in all marriages are the physical appearance and wealth; displaying both qualities is ideal, but usually having one is enough. For example in Perrault’s version of the Cinderella fairytale “Donkeyskin,” the wealthy Prince saves the young girl from her incestuous father and miserable life as a kitchen hand because of her unsurpassable beauty. Once revealed from her suit of donkey skins, Perrault writes:

She arrived at the king’s chambers and crossed the rooms in her ceremonial clothes whose radiant beauty had never been before seen. Her lovely blonde hair glittered with diamonds that emitted a bright light with their many rays. Her blue eyes, large and soft, were filled with proud majesty, but never inflicted pain and gave only pleasure when they looked at you. Her waist was so small and fine that you could encircle it with two hands. Even showing their charms and their divine grace, the women of the court and all their ornaments lost any kind of appeal by comparison. (115)

Perrault’s description of the “princess” as “radiant,” “soft,” or “lovely” includes no mention of her intelligence, work ethic, or life goals. The prince does not know this girl as an individual, yet he values her and wants her hand in marriage as a way to possess her beauty. Who doesn’t want a beautiful belonging to flaunt? Most fairytales end at the wedding because they do not want to explore the possibility that there may not be a “happy ending” after all. Fairytales may vary in

plot, but when it gets down to the foundation of the relationships, they are all based on the same shallow, superficial pleasures.

All of Bluebeard's wives choose to marry Bluebeard based solely on his money, not his internal attributes or personality. Any rational person would not agree to wed Bluebeard, a complete stranger, based on the fate of his previous wives. Originally, both sisters use their better judgment and refuse his hand in marriage because of his savage ugliness, but one eventually gives in to the promise of financial support and indulgence for her and her family. Perrault writes, "neither of the two girls wanted to marry him, and the offer went back and forth between them, since they added even more to their sense of disgust was that he had already married several women, and no one knew what had become of them" (144). These women had ample warning about their imminent future but ignore them because of the temporary relief from their impoverished lives. This proves that society values being wealthy and desired by a man as compared to being independent, liberated and in control of one's welfare. Such narrow minded expectations place women on a path towards obedience and in the case of Bluebeard's wives, loss of innocence.

Because Bluebeard has wooed his wives with his money, how is he to know if his wives are ever sincere and love him, or if it is always just a superficial relationship? In the fairy tale, Bluebeard gives each of his wives unlimited amounts of money with the hopes of making them happy enough to ignore the ugliness of his character. To test their loyalty he withholds the truth about his secret chamber. As Perrault writes:

"Here," he said, 'are the keys to my two large store rooms. Here are the ones for the gold and silver china that is too good for everyday use. Here are the ones for my strongboxes, where my gold and silver are kept. Here are the ones for the caskets where my jewels are stored. And finally, this is the passkey to all the rooms in my mansion. As for this particular key, it is the key to the small room at the end of the long passage on the lower floor. Open anything you want. Go anywhere you wish. But I absolutely forbid you to enter that little room, and if you so much as open it a crack, there will be no limit to my anger.'" (145)

This passage illustrates the dominating ways Bluebeard controls his wives actions. The author uses harsh, demanding language such as "forbid," and "anger," to characterize Bluebeard as tyrannical and oppressive in the eyes of Bluebeard's wife to enhance the darkness of Bluebeard's character Perrault creates. Bluebeard also makes her believe that she has control, or a choice,

over her actions by trusting her with all of the keys to his home. However, he stifles this liberty by limiting how she can use her power. By testing his wives to see which will obey his one stipulation, he can determine who is greedy and curious and who will be subordinate to his commands.

Through the violent encounter in the forbidden chamber of death, Bluebeard's wives lose their innocence in a horrific face, similar to rape. Plagued by curiosity, Bluebeard's wife enters the forbidden room while Bluebeard is away on business. Upon entering, she sees the carcasses of Bluebeard's previous wives causing her to drop the room key. Once the wives enter the chamber and witness the horrors inside, they lose their innocence forever. As Perrault states, "having noticed that the key to the room was stained with blood, [the wife] wiped it two or three times, but the blood would not come off at all" (146). As Warner explains, the contaminated key represents the wives betrayal of their husband's wishes and also establishes a test of loyalty that they fail miserably. The key can also be seen as a symbol of loss of innocence. Bluebeard preys on young women whom have never been married or with a man before. Tied to betrayal, innocence cannot be reinstated once lost. The blood that will not rub off represents the inability to revert back to a state of innocence as well as how Bluebeard kills these women at a time of sexual maturation and childbearing (Warner 123). Women are expected to be virgins at the time of the marriage. Blood dripping from the key represents the loss of this virginity or innocence. The connection of loss of innocence to Bluebeard's violence and manipulation makes this scene resemble rape. Although Bluebeard does not literally rape his wives, his actions create the same effects on developing women. Taking away of a young woman's innocence is almost a factor of attraction to him. He gleefully tells his wives he will slaughter them. To his frightened wife, Bluebeard states, "you tried to enter that little room. Well, madam, now that you have opened it, you can go right in and take your place beside the ladies who you saw there" and "you must die madam...and it will be right away" (146). While most husbands are not wife murderers, this tale type suggest that violence is common in an institution that upholds male domination.

It is evident that female dependence on male saviors in Perrault's version does not only negatively influence female readers but males as well. As author Marcia Lieberman explains, rescuing is very predictable for all fairytales and occurs in any form of struggle ranging from abuse to kidnapping to true loves magical kiss (Lieberman 391). Again, in this tale the men have the power to determine the entire life of the females. This portrays women as completely

helpless, a puppet on a string being pulled by her male counterparts. The gender roles established in fairytales are both harmful for female and male readers by creating unrealistic expectations. While women are being pressured into marriage and trained to be the ideal subordinate, passive women, men are simultaneously being stereotyped and pressured to maintain social norms. Males, from a young age, are being represented as dominant, masculine, saviors in almost all tales. In the Bluebeard tale type, boys are taught that they are the head of the household, can place restrictions on women, and have control over their wellbeing. From the perspective of the wives' brothers, readers can begin to make connections that males are always saviors. Boys feel pressure to be macho and constantly look for a "weak" female that they can swoop in to rescue. Rather than looking internally to fix personal flaws, they focus outward on helping others, ignoring their weaknesses. This can be very detrimental because if a young boy is not living up to these interpreted roles, does this mean they are not a true man? This disconnect can lead to gender confusion and unwarranted shame in possessing sensitive or more predominantly feminine characteristics. Not every man must wave a sword, own a woman, or have a chamber of previous wives in order to be a "man".

While Bluebeard is not cast as someone to emulate, the Bluebeard tale type still recognizes male dominance as the norm. As seen in Perrault's morals section at the end of the tale, men are no longer as murderous or traumatizing but the dominant role in the relationship is still apparent. He writes, "no longer are husbands so terrible, demanding the impossible, acting unhappy and jealous, with their wives they toe in line; and whatever color their beard might be, it's not hard to tell which of the pair is master" (148). One example of this dominance is when Bluebeard discovers his wife's betrayal and he gives her time to collect herself before he slaughters her as he did his previous wives. Instead of escaping, fighting until she has no strength left, she waits for her brother to save her on charging steeds. Not only does she sit around and wait for assistance, she "threw herself at her husband's feet, weeping and begging his pardon, with all signs of genuine regret for disobeying him (Perrault 146). Clearly, she is both literally and figuratively lowering herself beneath her husband. By kneeling, she degrades herself by begging at Bluebeard's feet as though she is not worthy, which not only makes her seem inferior, but furthers her subordination to her husband's orders. As Tivadar Gorilovics writes, Bluebeard's wife shows all the signs of a remorseful Christian woman. However, Bluebeard displays no mercy because he has this process down to a science and is well versed in the pleas for salvation from his disobedient wives. Her brothers are simply messengers of justice, coming to stop a

villainous sinner, allowing for a semi-peaceful resolution to such a gruesome ordeal (Gorilovics 20). Clearly, the reliance on male savior limits female independence and problem solving skills, teaching young readers that passivity brings salvation and reward.

Although the current wife's sister, Sister Anne, appears to aid in the salvation of the wife, she actually plays no role in the rescue and her ambiguous role makes her appear disconnected or unaware of the dangerous situation her sister is in. While waiting for her brothers to save her, the current wife screams to Sister Anne for assistance in getting their brothers attention. Her sister replies, "I see nothing but the sun shining and the green grass growing" and when pressed for information about the brothers whereabouts by her sister, Sister Anne replies "no, oh no, sister, it's just a flock of sheep" (Perrault 147). Sister Anne seems to be extremely clueless that her sister is about to be murdered unless she is saved by her brothers, thus making her seem almost unattached to the story itself. Perrault's characterization of Sister Anne supports the theme of powerless women presented throughout the tale because her addition is unimportant and insignificant. Perrault clearly oppresses women through the creation of his female characters that lack the ability to save themselves.

Perrault gives women little credit in many of his fairytales by going against feminist goals, demeaning female independence, and limiting the women's ability to save themselves from their troubles. This is contrasted in the Brothers Grimm version of the "Bluebeard" tale, "Fitcher's Bird," in which the female character is empowered and saves herself and her two sisters based on her own wit. As compared to Perrault's version of "Bluebeard" where the wife waits idly for assistance, in the Brothers Grimm version, the third sister puts the pieces of her dead sisters (Bluebeard's previously slaughtered wives) back together, magically reviving them. She then tricks her husband into carrying them back to their home and upon his return, locks him inside and torches the house, killing him. This version is unusual because the wife thinks of the idea to "[crawl] into a barrel of honey, cut open a featherbed and [roll] in the feathers until she looked like a strange bird that a soul would not recognize" in order to lure the husband inside his home with her bird song (Grimm and Grimm 150). The Grimm Brothers give women the capacity and opportunity to make decisions on their own. This allows for female readers to feel confident that they are as capable as men in areas of problem solving and mental strength, which is refreshing when compared to Perrault's version. Feminists would agree that Perrault's degradation of

women sends a damaging message that women should be dependent on others when facing their hardships.

In Perrault's version of "Bluebeard" he includes a moral section at the end of the tale that describes how females are subordinate to the dominating ways of men. A very important piece of Bluebeard's chamber is the element of disobedience that drives the wife's actions. Bluebeard deliberately told her not to enter that specific room but curiosity got the better of her. In the morals section of the fairy tale, Perrault makes it very clear that the blame is on the wives for disobeying their husbands rather than on Bluebeard who is a serial killer. Perrault writes, "curiosity, in spite of its many charms, can bring with it serious regrets; you can see a thousand examples of it every day. Women succumb, but it's a fleeting pleasure; as soon as you satisfy it, it ceases to be. And it always proves very, very costly" (148). The emphasis on women being in the wrong teaches the reader that women who do not follow every order given to them deserve to be slaughtered. Perrault specifically targets women in this moral section rather than broadening his statement to all of mankind. He also uses the word, "you" which seems to be an attack on his female readers. These morals further oppressive stereotypes of women and vilify the innocent while ignoring the true monster.

The Bluebeard tale type is unusual as a fairytale in that it depicts life after marriage. Hardly any fairytales expose post marital life and as a result young readers view marriage as an end point in life. As Marcia Lieberman explains, out of the popular collection of fairytales, *The Blue Fairy Book*, only a few stories, out of the thirty, even go into aspects of marital life. Eighteen of the thirty literally end in the ceremony. Although there may be a lot of weddings in this book, the reader rarely gets a perspective of married life (394). This is very startling because from a young age, women are indoctrinated with the concept that marriage is the main goal in one's life. How can this be if they are never given any information about what to expect after the ceremony? Women who do not want marriage to be the main focus in their lives are seen as "stuck up" for denying a man's hand (Lieberman 393). This puts even more pressure on women to conform to societal ideals to avoid being viewed as an outcast. Marriage is constantly the main goal and therefore becomes an end point in one's life rather than a new beginning.

When analyzing the common phrase in fairytales, "they lived happily ever after," we can see that the authors place a clear emphasis on "lived." "Lived" is a past tense verb as though both are dead. As Barzilai explains, although the wives survive, husband and wife have destroyed each

other in different ways (Barzilai 510). When reading fairytales, we often overlook the past tense of this phrase. If we pay attention to it, we can see that a happy ending does not really occur; it is a mechanism to keep women believing that marriage should be their ultimate goal.

Perrault and the Brothers Grimm versions of “Bluebeard,” reveal that society’s idea about marriage is clearly for economic prosperity regardless of the consequences. This is proved through overlooking atrocious character flaws in their spouses, leading to imminent loss of innocence, subordination to male orders, and acceptance of traditional gender roles which harm both female and male sense of identity. “Bluebeard” is a fairytale that is rarely read because of its unusual violence and graphic imagery. Many do not know this tale type simply because it has not been commercialized through a Disney film adaptation. This is disheartening because it is a valuable critique on traditional fairytales and their obsession with marriage. There is a need for more exposure to the “Bluebeard” tale type because it warns girls and boys about the pitfalls of acting according to societal assigned gender roles and the over significance of material possessions. Marriage has become an instrument to move up the social ladder and a means to a higher reward rather than an expression of love. It causes women and men to fall into stereotyped gender roles. Women become discouraged from achieving their life goals and obtaining roles of power because they believe a man will create their true happiness. True love defies these ideals and separates duties more equally by disregarding societal norms. The “Bluebeard” tale type is an example of the consequences that arise when individuals base their happiness on superficial characteristics instead of true love.

Works Cited

Barzilai, Shuli. “The Bluebeard Barometer: Charles Dickens and Captain Murderer.” *Victorian Literature and Culture*. 32.2 (2004): 504-524. Print.

Bergoffen, Debra. “Marriage, Autonomy, and the Feminine Protest.” *Hypatia*. 14.4 (1999): 18-35. Print.

Gorilovics, Tivadar. “Secrets Of The Forbidden Chamber: Bluebeard.” *Secret Spaces, Forbidden Places: Rethinking Culture*. Ed. Fran Lloyd and Catherine O’Brien. New York, NY: Berghahn, 2000. 17-28. Print.

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. "Fitcher's Bird." *The Classic Fairy Tales*. Ed. Maria Tatar. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1999. 148-151. Print.

Lieberman, Marcia R. "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale." *College English*. 34.3 (1972): 383-395. Print.

Perrault, Charles. "Bluebeard." *The Classic Fairy Tales*. Ed. Maria Tatar. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1999. 144-148. Print.

—. "Donkeyskin." *The Classic Fairy Tales*. Ed. Maria Tatar. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1999. 109-116. Print.

Warner, Marina. "Bluebeard's Brides: The Dream of the Blue Chamber." *Grand Street*. 9.1 (1989): 121-130. Print.