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Victorian Influence on *Beauty and the Beast*

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A research paper completed for English 4710. This is an advanced undergraduate course focused on the study of a particular genre and its ability to articulate meaning in historical, social, and/or literary contexts. This paper is part of the Children's Literature genre series.

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Victorian Influence on *Beauty and the Beast*

Before children's books, fairy tales were orally passed down by generation. Many popular children's stories originated as oral stories, such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Alice in Wonderland*. Technological advancements, like the printing press, transcribed these tales into print. The oral story naturally changed from generation to generation and country to country. Therefore, numerous publications of *Beauty and the Beast* emerged over the course of three centuries. Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot created its earliest known written form in seventeenth-century France, entitled *La Jeune Americaine et les Contes Marins*, which roughly translates as *The Young American and the Sea Stories* (Beauty 1). This title differs from Jeanne-Marie LePrince de Beaumont's popular 1770s adaptation, *The Beauty and the Beast* (1). Most recently, Disney translated the lost text into a movie in 1991. *Beauty and the Beast* has become a staple in children's literature over the last three centuries. The journey of this lost fairy tale is incredible.

The small variations within each *Beauty and the Beast* publication tailor the text to a particular audience. Barbot's original fairy tale chronicled the adventures of an American immigrant at sea. Centuries later, Disney's 1991 film version follows a bookish Belle on her journey of finding true love. Neither story is right or wrong. Rather, they were written for different audiences. The vast contrast of content highlights the nature of lost texts. This essay executes an in-depth analysis of W.B. Conkey Company's Victorian publication of [*Beauty and the Beast*](#) from Chicago, Illinois in 1897. The history of *Beauty and the Beast*, from Barbot to

Disney, shows the influence of historical context. Therefore, it is important to first understand the norms of Victorian courtship. Marriages were based on wealth and status, not physical attraction or romantic love. This background of Victorian courtship illuminates the complex gender roles within W.B. Conkey Company's *Beauty and the Beast*. Secondly, the adaptation includes several Victorian literary elements, such as fantasy, child labor, and the child redeemer. The author uses these tools to resonate a message with Victorian readers. Analyzing the text through this cultural lens sheds light on the complex gender dynamic between Beauty and her beast. Therefore, a cultural and historical approach to the text uncovers the didactic functions of W.B. Conkey Company's *Beauty and the Beast*.

Since 1897, women have made monumental strides towards gender equality in society. However, it is important to read the lost text through the historical lens of the period. Analyzing courtship in the Victorian period uncovers a new dimension to W.B. Conkey Company's *Beauty and the Beast* adaptation. *Beauty and the Beast*, by title, is a love story. Therefore, the norms of courtship play a prominent role in understanding the lost text. Disney's 1991 depiction of *Beauty and the Beast* tells a story of mutual love achieved through a love triangle. The Beast is Belle's true love. In the 1897 adaptation, Beauty accepts his proposal because "she felt sorry for him" (11). Beauty's pity for the beast is quickly rewarded as he transforms into a handsome prince. The author encourages girls to look beyond physical attraction and romantic love. The contrast of these two versions highlights the relevance of cultural norms and perceptions of love. In the Victorian period, "Courtship was considered more a career move than a romantic interlude" (Hoppe 1). This fairy tale was aimed at the young girls that were being "groomed [for] this role in life--dutiful wife and mother" (Hoppe 1). Therefore, the audience of this fairy tale

was thoroughly familiar with their roles in courtship and their purpose in marriage. The author uses Beauty and her Beast to prepare young girls for arranged marriages, not true love.

Instead, class and social status served as the most important factors in marriage. In the 1890s, women lacked the same rights and freedoms as men. They were financially dependent on their families and spouses. Upper-class families enticed male suitors with generous dowries (Hoppe 3). Once a woman was married, all her possessions reverted to her husband (Hoppe 3). Therefore, financial standing was openly discussed as it heavily affected the decision to wed. In fact, “Many marriages were considered a business deal” that would hopefully grow into fond feelings toward each other “almost as deep as love” (Hoppe 3). This cultural view of marriage drastically differs from the current purpose of marriage. Perceptions of love changed with the autonomy of women in the 1900s. However, the historical and cultural context of the publication is necessary to understand its overall message.

This historical context uncovers new insight into the didactic function of W.B. Conkey Company’s *Beauty and the Beast*. Beauty’s sisters represent the traditional view of courtship and marriage in the Victorian period. They are obsessed with material wealth (Perrault 3) and societal status (1). Like many women, her sisters hope to advance higher up the social ladder through a wealthy marriage. The fairy tale strategically attaches a negative connotation to their coquettish conduct. Beauty opposes her sisters as an idealized protagonist and child redeemer character. She promotes humility through her lack of concern for class distinction. Through trials and tribulations, she is kind to everyone: from a lowly beggar (2) to an ugly beast (9). The author reinforces these values by rewarding Beauty’s character. Her generous deeds and moral character are rewarded with a palace (13), wealth (13), handsome husband (10), and her father (13). Furthermore, her sisters’ “jealous and unkind disposition[s]” are punished as they are

turned into stone pedestals at her palace gates (13). Beauty moves up the social ladder through being a good person to others. The author uses Beauty as an ideal embodiment of the Victorian maiden.

The author braces young girls for the realities of Victorian marriage through Beauty. Beauty's fairy tale marriage stems from pity, not love. The twenty-first century Disney version would not romanticize a marriage based on pity. At that time, "Marriage was encouraged only within one's class" and love was not an expected component of marriage (Hoppe 3). [*Beauty and the Beast*](#) encourages readers to look beyond the ugly exterior of suitors. Beauty embraced her duty alongside the Beast; similarly, many Victorian women had to embrace their arranged marriages. Her father's actions forced Beauty to stay with the Beast. Many Victorian maidens were promised a lifelong marriage, despite a lack of love. [*Beauty and the Beast*](#) encourages young girls to treat their spouses with kindness and pity. Eventually, Beauty grows to care for the Beast and she inherits a fairy tale ending. Victorian courtship heavily influences the message within this adaptation. It served a didactic function to prospective young maidens as they face financially based marriages. The cultural context of courtship fosters better understanding of the gender dynamics between Beauty and her Beast.

The author also uses Victorian literary conventions to connect with the audience. A close reading of W.B. Conkey Company's publication reveals its location in literary history as a Victorian work. The title alone allures readers into the Victorian convention of fantasy. Within the first pages, beggars transform into fairies (Perrault 2) and frightening beasts speak perfect English (5). Child readers immediately dive into a world of magic unlike their ordinary lives. This device encourages children to challenge rationality through fantasy. Just as Beauty accepts the Beast's proposal, "there was a great rumbling" and the beast transforms into a "handsome

young Prince” (11). Fantasy cultivates the imaginative nature of children and calls them to play. Magic played a prominent role in pre-Victorian publications as well. However, imagination held new meaning in Victorian literature as an opportunity to escape urbanization and industrialization. The fantasy within [*Beauty and the Beast*](#) encourages children to embrace youth.

Another focus of Victorian literature is child labor (Wadsworth). This reoccurring image of the literary period was an unfortunate reality of the industrialization and urbanization boom (Wadsworth). Therefore, Beauty’s abrupt fall into poverty appeals to the reality of some readers and the fears of others. Upon opening the book, readers are confronted with the image of Beauty on her knees, surrounded by cleaning supplies, scrubbing the fireplace (Perrault 1). This image covers the majority of the page and serves as the first impression of Beauty to the audience (1). This introductory image embodies the Victorian convention of child labor. The idealized fairy tale maiden is traditionally an idealized maiden. Beauty, on the other hand, is a humble peasant girl. Beauty’s portrayal in this publication drastically contrasts with fairy tale norms. Instead, the opening image of W.B. Conkey Company’s [*Beauty and the Beast*](#) truly captures the Victorian era (Perrault 1). Child labor is a typology of Victorian literature because it captured the harsh reality of the time period; industrialization forced children to support their families. This image perfectly demonstrates how this [*Beauty and the Beast*](#) adaptation appeals to a Victorian audience.

The final and most important convention of Victorian literature is Beauty’s embodiment of the child redeemer. The stereotypical child redeemer character demonstrates innocence and purity amidst contaminated society. The untainted innocence of the child redeemer challenges the corruption of the adult world (Wadsworth). The industrial world shifted agricultural and pastoral traditions into the hustling and bustling city. Urbanization and industrialization brought

advances in science, but also regression in many areas, such as harsh child labor. Therefore, Victorian literature elevated the child redeemer character as a contrast to the surrounding society.

Beauty embodies the Victorian child redeemer. Her sisters and Father are obsessed with money, material objects, and societal status. Beauty's genuine heart challenges the need for wealth as she advises her father, "better be poor and happy than you should go into danger" (2). To many readers, the thought of performing child labor and losing familial wealth is a nightmare. Beauty reminds the audience that her father is the ultimate gift, not a "velvet robe" or a "necklace of diamonds" as her sisters request. Her sisters, on the other hand, focus their existence on marrying well. They obsess over material wealth, societal status, and beauty. As character foils, they emphasize Beauty's genuine and kind heart. While, Beauty does "all the housework," her sisters spit "unkind" words at her (2). This scene was familiar to young readers forced to perform chores or child labor. Also, it accurately depicts sibling dynamics. Beauty's persistent work ethic promotes parental obedience. She demonstrates a concern for her sisters, despite their actions. These Victorian literary conventions direct a didactic function to the Victorian audience.

As the protagonist and child redeemer, Beauty is a role model to the audience. Her actions and demeanor promote proper values. She echoes the parable of the Good Samaritan as the only daughter to fetch the beggar woman a glass of milk (2). This scene demonstrates Beauty's lack of prejudice towards those of lower class and her innocence amidst a stratified society. Her concern and care for the disguised fairy are immediately rewarded (2). The author vicariously teaches the audience that kindness will be rewarded. Beauty is not the idealized virginal princess seen in most fairy tales; she is a child laborer of low class. Rather than elevate

Beauty on a pedestal, the author makes her relatable to the Victorian audience. The author projects Victorian values through Beauty's relatable character.

Beauty and the Beast is a fixture in children's literature. This in-depth analysis of W.B. Conkey Company's publication of [*Beauty and the Beast*](#) highlights the influence of Victorian culture in the construction of the fairy tale. First, the adaptation fulfills the several conventions of Victorian literature including fantasy, child labor and the child redeemer. These literary devices appeal to a Victorian audience amidst a changing world of industrialization. Secondly, the Victorian perceptions of love and courtship expose a deeper didactic purpose to the text. Beauty's child redeemer function not only encourages good behavior, but also promotes the idealized maiden. She, unlike her sisters, achieves the reward of a perfect marriage. Furthermore, her growing concern for the Beast encourages young girls to embrace their role in arranged marriages. These obvious messages expose the view of girls as wives-in-training. A Victorian lens reveals another dimension to the classic fairy tale. The powerful influence of Victorian culture on children's literature demonstrates its didactic role in educating readers.

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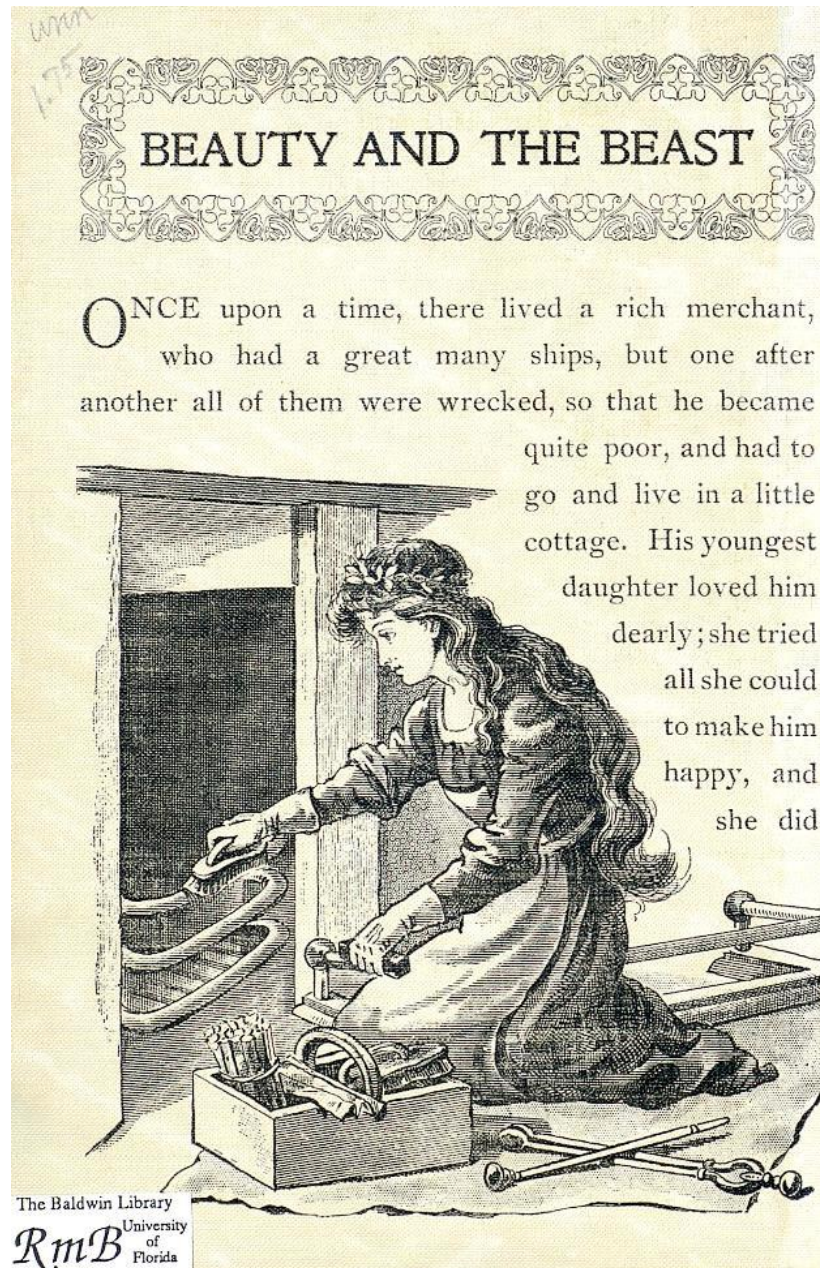
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Appendix

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The two
girls answer-
that they

were not going to wait on old beggar women, but
Beauty went at once and fetched a glass of milk.

The old woman was very grateful, and told her that if
her father went to a certain country he would find his ships
and be rich once more. Then she vanished—for she was
really a fairy—and Beauty ran with joy to tell her father.

“But, father, dear,” she said, “don’t go ; better be poor
and happy than that you should go into danger.” “Stupid
girl,” cried her sisters, “of course father will go ; won’t

for they were
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Beauty started to see her father, but before she had got far she remembered her two sisters, and turning to the fairy she said: "Fairy, dear, where are my two sisters?" The fairy replied that for their jealous and unkind disposition she had turned them into stone to be placed on pedestals at the palace gate. Beauty was very sorry to hear this about her sisters, but the fairy assured her that they would be happy at some future time, and told her to go at once, as her father was waiting for her. As Beauty reached the palace steps she

saw her father standing in the door. She kissed him and told him how glad she was to see him, and that from that time he was to live with herself and the Prince at the palace.

