

MLA Style

Written by an 11th grade student for an AP English class, this seven-page paper analyzes the social role of fairy tales and folktales by examining “Rapunzel” as a child’s introduction to the impending changes of adolescence. Of particular interest is this student’s excellent use of lead-ins to borrowed material. **The thesis statement is highlighted in green, the blueprint in blue, and topic sentences in yellow to call attention to the organizational structure of the paper.**

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Surviving Adolescence with Magic

The familiar words “Once upon a time” evoke, for many, feelings of nostalgia and warmth; they strike a chord of remembrance. A traditional fairy tale is more memorable than many contemporary children’s stories because of its capacity to delve into some of the darker facets of human nature; despite the best efforts of the Victorians to soften and dilute these tales for the nursery, they have kept their folklore essence. This honesty makes the fairy tale appealing to children curious about the realities of the adult world. “Rapunzel,” a fairy tale retold by the Grimm brothers, despite its layers of fantasy, is not afraid to “tell it like it is.” **It deals with some of the important aspects of adolescent growth and development: physical self and sexuality, rebellion, and parent-child relationships.** **By symbolizing the perils of adolescence, Rapunzel’s story of imprisonment and escape provides a child, particularly a young girl, with comfort and**

guidance as she prepares to enter this stormy time of life.

“Rapunzel” offers a young girl confidence about her changing body and emerging sexuality. Rapunzel’s body has tremendous magical power: her tears cure the prince’s blindness, and her long tresses allow him to climb up the tower. This power of Rapunzel’s body to bring her success reassures the child that her own body will contain such strength (Bettelheim 149). As puberty begins to affect a young girl, the changes it inflicts cause her to feel awkward and unsure. “Rapunzel” helps to curb these insecurities by telling her that, despite these changes, her body still has the means by which she can grow and succeed. Young girls must deal not only with the changes in their outward appearance but also with the emotional effects of adolescence, namely, an emerging sexuality. Psychologist Mary Pipher explains that to come to terms with this newfound sexual self, a girl must learn how to make sexual decisions and to be comfortable with her sexuality, a task that may be one of the major hurdles of young adulthood (205).

Rapunzel’s golden hair is a complex symbol. Marina Warner points out that “maidenhair can symbolize maidenhead, and its loss, too, and the flux of sexual energy that this releases ...” (374). This sexuality, in the form of Rapunzel’s long tresses, enables her to form a relationship with the prince; it lets him reach her in the tower. According to the Grimm version, Rapunzel was “dreadfully frightened when she saw the prince, for she had never seen a man before” (Warner 340). Similarly, an adolescent girl seems to wake up one morning and suddenly “see” the opposite sex as she discovers the different relationships she might have. The fairy tale reminds the young adolescent that she is not alone in her surprise. The young teenager learns

that, just as Rapunzel's new sexuality lets her form a loving bond with the prince, these new feelings will let the teenager form similar bonds. "Rapunzel" does not, however, make its message too blatant. Bettelheim argues that since the tale does not mention marriage, nor does it explicitly describe a sexual relationship between the two lovers, one should understand the bond as symbolic of pure love rather than as raw sexuality (115). Thus the story, while encouraging the formation of new relationships, does not promote promiscuity.

Rapunzel's story also prepares a child for the painful rebellion and process of development that she must undergo to form her individual personality. Pipher describes the difficulties of adolescence as a time when girls "crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle" (19). She adds that without this sometimes painful period of rebellion, a young person, though healthier in the short term, may not develop into a creative, independent adult (92). This stage will be difficult for the child and will be marked by immaturity, struggle, and fear as she tries to make decisions on her own for the first time. But ultimately the struggle shapes her into a more vibrant, thoughtful personality. By following this pattern of struggle and by encouraging autonomy, "Rapunzel" guides young women through this process. Another distinguished folklorist, Maria Tatar, considers Rapunzel's tower the symbolic representation of a mother's protective rules and admonitions. Far from being cautionary elements, as people often interpret them, these warnings become encouragement as they rouse the curiosity and sense of adventure in the young protagonist (166). Rapunzel's imprisonment becomes a metaphor for the strictures a young teenager feels compelled to test, such as her parents' demands for curfews or observance of religious rules, and thus encourages the adolescent to stretch beyond these bonds

to become independent.

The tale does not pretend, however, that the transition will be smooth. According to Max Luthi, Rapunzel's story represents a growing process in which the adolescent must first overcome the hardships of loss and danger to achieve lasting happiness (112). Citing a Mediterranean version in which the witch kidnaps Rapunzel after biting off her ear, Luthi sees the tale as one of a scary passage into adolescence. For the modern teenager, this kidnapping might be analogous to a change of schools or a parental trip to Europe that leaves the children seemingly abandoned at home. The young must also face the effects of their immaturity. For example, when the witch discovers the two young lovers, the prince rashly flings himself from the tower window, gouging his eyes out on the thorns below. Bettelheim notes the childishness of the lovers' behavior toward the witch, and their despair and hopelessness after she banishes them. These failures, however, are part of the learning process and the development of a responsible self (Bettelheim 149–50). As adolescents ride an emotional roller coaster, they not surprisingly have a tendency toward melodrama. By exaggerating this quality in the prince and Rapunzel, the tale offers comfort and guidance. It cautions a child to think through her problems and to consider consequences rationally. Because the prince eventually regains his sight, the implication is that one can overcome youthful errors and achieve happiness.

For an adolescent, establishing a separate identity means breaking parental ties, and "Rapunzel" sympathizes with the difficulties of the parent-child relationship. It embodies the resentment adolescents often feel toward their parents. Rapunzel's parents are an archetypal "dysfunctional family" as her mother's silly, impractical desire leads to the family's breakdown

(Tatar 58). This aspect appeals to a teenager's tendency to suspect that her parents are somehow responsible for her unhappiness. The realization that her parents are not perfect leads the young teenager to feel less close to them, and Rapunzel, after her incarceration in the tower, begins to forget her true mother. As Luthi points out, because Rapunzel forgets her parents does not mean she no longer loves them, just that she needs to become emotionally independent of them (114).

In a shift of emphasis, the tale turns from the teenager's perception of a negligent parent to her view of an overprotective, controlling one. Rapunzel moves from her true parents' home into the tower of the witch, where her imprisonment symbolizes the oppression an adolescent often feels from her parents. With this shift, the tale focuses on the main conflict of adolescence. As Pipher maintains, the teenager must give up the protection of her parents' loving relationship just when she feels most vulnerable because of the changes in her life (23). The witch's selfish and seemingly cruel imprisonment becomes comforting to the child who is not yet ready to give up this protection (Bettelheim 148). So "Rapunzel" deals with a teenager's tumultuous feelings about her parents with an exaggerated characterization of all parents' natural desire to keep their child safe from the world.

This approach keeps the balance between encouraging independence and inciting fear and uneasiness. In *The Tower and the Well*, a study of Madame D'Aulnoy's fairy tales, Amy DeGraff observes that a tower often represents a place where the inner self develops. The youth's experience and maturation within the tower suggest that "resistance to parents' authority is a prerequisite to autonomy" (71). This seems equally true in "Rapunzel." Rapunzel must struggle within the confines of the witch's tower until her experience with the prince helps her to break free. The adolescent understands from the tale's message that only as she "breaks free" from her

parents' "bonds," can she become an autonomous individual. One final aspect of this story makes it an apt metaphor for parent-child relationships: the fate of the witch. Unlike the stepmother in "Snow White," who must dance herself to death in her red hot shoes, or the stepmother in "Cinderella," who must live out her life as a servant, the witch-like foster mother suffers no act of vengeance. As Rapunzel and the prince have grown out of their adolescent turmoil, they feel no need to punish. So teenagers can hope to grow into independent adults without harboring resentment toward their sometimes-inadequate parents.

"Rapunzel" captures a child's interest with its magic and fantasy and then keeps that interest by avoiding moralistic lectures and by playing up to a naturally adventurous, rebellious youth. Because it deals with serious issues of sexuality and rebellion, the tale is intriguing and memorable not only to a child, but also to young people who are undergoing the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Though a child may not recognize the tale's symbolism or relevance immediately, the deeper meaning of "Rapunzel" may have a profound effect that lasts well beyond the nursery into later years.

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