

Representing the Reprehensible: Fairy Tales, News Stories & the Monstrous Karla Homolka

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Abstract

Fairy tales and news stories are not often linked; however, in many news stories, Canadian media depicted Karla Homolka as both passive princess and evil witch. This paper argues journalists used aspects of popularized fairy tales to shape and give meaning to Homolka's life, personality and crimes, and these constructs created a discourse that limited, liberated and ultimately problematised the public's conception of Homolka.

Résumé

Les contes de fées et les nouvelles histoires ne sont pas souvent reliés, cependant, les media canadiens ont peint Karla Homolka comme étant à la fois une princesse passive et une mauvaise sorcière. Cet article discute de la façon dont les journalistes se sont servis des aspects des contes de fées popularisés pour façonner et donner une signification à la vie, à la personnalité et aux crimes d'Homolka, et ces constructions mentales ont créé une dissertation qui limita, libéra, et ultimement problématiza la conception que le public a d'Homolka.

There are a few news stories as there are a relatively small number of fairy tales that are told and retold. Both types continue to enjoy popularity because initially they seem to be about universal human concerns that span differences of time and culture. But a careful reading of the history of fairy tales shows that the stories of the Brothers Grimm, Andrew Lang and others do have a history that is anything but ageless and timeless (Harries 2001, 4-5). Shaped and codified by successive, educated and literate tale-tellers, the fairy tale is not now, and never was, a neutral vehicle for conveying a simple message about once upon a time. While there are many fairy tales that do not depict women as weak and passive (Harries 2001, 7; Carter 1990, xvi), most of the stories that are best-known to North American audiences today bring with them an outlook that is sexist and narrow (Lieberman 1986, 185). While Canadian audiences might expect these elements in a traditional version of "Snow White," they may not be similarly prepared when those same elements appear in news stories of a serious nature. When journalists borrowed story frames, characterizations, and plot descriptions from the realm of "happily ever after" to tell the tales of Karla Homolka, they also, though undoubtedly unwittingly, imported some of those unsettling implications.

This article argues that the way in which mainstream Canadian print and broadcast media have variously treated Homolka draws its cultural importance from a certain set of popularized Western fairy tales. Her life, personality and the events of the past were set up by journalists to be viewed through the lens of "once upon a time" and this construction created a discourse that in some instances limited, in others liberated, but always ultimately problematized the public's perception of Homolka. When discussing how journalists report violence and crime, it is useful to consider some aspects of frame analysis. This approach emphasizes that the broader meanings of news stories are not only found in the explicit content, but also are an implicit result of how such stories are told

(Neuman, Just and Crigler 1992, 76). Meaning, from a framing analysis perspective, can come from the message itself, but it can also be derived from contextual cues or features that are not obvious. How a news story is framed is an important consideration, then, because in part, the frame itself - in this instance, the fairy tale - can suggest certain ideas and negate others.

This article begins with a discussion of the fairy tale aspects of a selection of print and broadcast coverage, and uses aspects of framing analysis to trace how the general dimensions of these tales influenced the underlying messages of the news story. Using elements of Judith Butler's argument articulated in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, I explore the powerless/powerful dichotomy embodied in the notion of "victim" by relating both text and photographic representations of Homolka to well-known passive characters in fairy tales. Fairy tales offer a limited vocabulary to explore motivations; similarly, Canadian legal institutions have relied on what Patricia Pearson describes as "the vocabulary of motive" to categorise Homolka, and the implications of using a masculine literature in this instance are discussed. Finally, I employ Julia Kristeva's idea of "the abject" to illustrate the paradoxes journalists have faced as they tried to articulate the inexplicable and simplify a complex and irreducible story: that of Homolka.

As Frank Davey in *Karla's Web* points out, when there is a paucity of genuine information (as there was because of a publication ban), storytellers often fall back on some limited narrative conventions for telling stories (Davey 1994, 54). The rules differ amongst narratives - there are certain prescriptions for romance, science fiction, and so forth. Davey argued that apart from a few newspapers and television outlets that resisted dramatizing the elements of the Bernardo-Homolka story, almost all told it as a gothic narrative (55). While he is persuasive, I would argue that most of the attributes he lists as belonging to the gothic genre also belong to the fairy tale, and because journalists as well as the vast majority of North Americans are as familiar with the fairy tale as with the gothic genre, I believe that the former actually served as a complementary controlling model or story frame. Working under tremendous time constraints and limited in terms of material, as well as struggling to make comprehensible the seemingly senseless violence

of the entire case, journalists chose a story frame that was, from their perspective, easy for audiences to follow, because the general shape of "once upon a time" is naively thought to be understood in its implications. The fairy tale form - a more familiar and simpler style than the gothic - offered an outline or frame to both journalists and audiences alike.

Karla Homolka first hit Canadian newspapers in February 1993 when Paul Bernardo was charged with sexually assaulting fifteen women in the Toronto area, and with the murder of two teenage girls. As his ex-wife, Homolka was an obvious source for media attention. But from the earliest stories, much of the mainstream print and broadcast media consistently framed their story angles around broad-based fairy tale themes, employing stock images and phrases from the general outlines of popularized fairy tales to explain, excuse, vilify, and ultimately, even to punish her. On February 19, 1993, the day after Bernardo was formally charged, *The Toronto Star* ran a story headlined "Passionate Love Led to Storybook Wedding," in which journalist Dale Brazao wrote that Homolka and Bernardo were "married last June in a storybook ending to a long courtship. But the fairytale ended with jarring sadness in early January after Bernardo was charged with an assault on his wife" (A6). In much of the television footage, regardless of what the voiceovers were saying, the words were overpowered by a Cinderella-like set of images: fair Homolka and handsome Bernardo leaving their wedding ceremony in an open carriage. They wove their way through the streets of what Trish Wood, journalist for *The Fifth Estate*, called the "fairy tale village of Niagara-on-the-Lake" and then settled in Port Dalhousie in a "pink fairy tale house" (Wood documentary). For the next few weeks, this was generally the story focus for mainstream Canadian media: Homolka, a beautiful blond young girl, was charmed by a prince who turned out to be a beast.

Like many well-known fairy tales, this kind of news coverage suggested that there is an air of unbelievability in the juxtaposition of beautiful appearance and monstrous action. As Davey notes, there was "mythological resonance in such deceptive monstrousness: the wolf in sheep's clothing, Red Riding Hood's wolf in her grandmother's shawl, or even the legendary Bluebeard who could charm eight wives" (1994, 38). In most European and Western adaptations

of fairy tales, "appearance" is a difficult and dangerous concept - judging appearance correctly can be one of the tests of wisdom. In part, the coverage implied that Homolka was perhaps fooled by Bernardo, and beyond her, it implied the audience ought to be cautious when assessing Homolka herself.

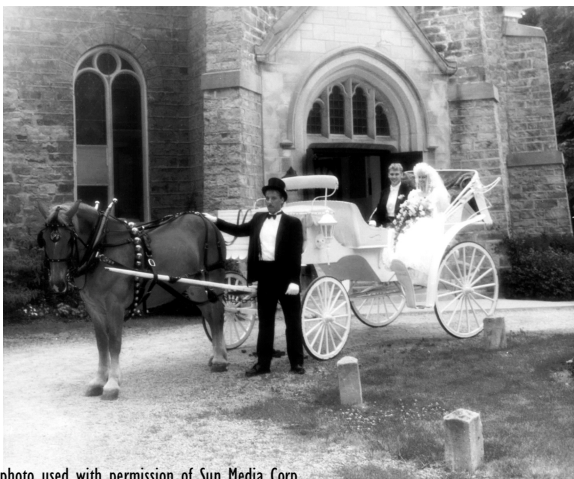


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Details journalists gave about the couple suggested an overwhelming normality - how could someone who looked so ordinary do such shocking things? The adjectives "storybook" and "fairy tale" were often used together to describe the couple's lifestyle (Davey 1994, 125). The words implied that what Bernardo and Homolka had achieved was enviable and unachievable for most of the population.

The descriptions of the wedding itself were borrowed frequently from fairy tale constructions, but far from having ancient "once upon a time" roots, the white wedding of today represents more a desire to reflect middle class pretensions to wealth and opulence than a wish to be prince and princess (Davey 1994, 124-6). Again, the journalists were not entirely accurate in their choice of framing devices and what they unwittingly implied was an obsession with consumerism that underlies not only the wedding industry, but also much of the way of life to which not only Bernardo and Homolka aspired, but many other news consumers as well. Here was an opportunity for journalists to link Bernardo and Homolka to their audiences in order to consider how they were not so different from everyone else and to probe society's responsibility in producing a couple who took ownership and control to a

horrendous extreme. But by framing them as a fairy tale couple, as living a life to which the rest of us could only aspire, they implied that they were not at all like us - they were freaks of inexplicable origin. As Davey pointed out, attempts to portray them "as monsters cause us to miss the extraordinary misogyny and female self hatred that can be observed in the killers....We overlook, moreover, that anger and self hatred are also consequences of misogyny in our culture" (1994, 59).

In the early days, many articles in the national papers wrote of Homolka as "victim." In this coverage, the focus on her appearance, age, love of animals, and the "testing" marriage she had just survived, created an image of Homolka as a helpless princess imprisoned in a tower of her husband's making. The word "victim" is both powerful and problematic in this context. Journalists almost always use it inside single quotation marks - even when the word is not attributed to someone else. Those employing the term want to draw attention to the idea that it has several meanings with which all readers might not agree, but at the same time, they are unwilling to explain or clarify the word's use. The effect of employing single quotation marks constantly, from a postmodern perspective, is to imply the opposite meaning (Hutcheon 1988, 13). By saying that Homolka is a 'victim,' the implication is that perhaps she is not.

While the word "victim" is not used explicitly in well-known popularized versions of classic European fairy tales, the situation in which most young female characters in these stories find themselves is such that the term could be applied. For example, in both Charles Perrault's version (what I would term a "classic" tale - one of several literary, well-known versions) and that of Walt Disney (a Western film adaptation of a classic story), Cinderella and Snow White are victims of bad luck (their biological mothers die and their fathers marry women who hated the daughters) and of a society that does not allow women to inherit or own property. In this sense, their situations make them victims and they meet their troubles largely with passivity and regret. In the Disney stories, the girls do not challenge the status quo; instead, they "succeed" (in marrying a prince) because they are beautiful, sweet, quiet, and patient. Cinderella also has a bit of help from her fairy godmother while

the dwarves and some forest animals assist Snow White. While it could be argued that Disney's Cinderella's rolling her eyes at her sisters' gaucheries suggests she is not completely submissive or accepting, according to the structuralist principles applied by Vladimir Propp to numerous classic tales, the heroine's primary function is a passive one: to be rescued (1968, 54). As Karen Rowe points out in "Feminism and Fairy Tales," women - or more correctly, heroines - in traditional fairy tales are usually diminutive and helpless; these (and incredible physical beauty) are their defining characteristics, and it is precisely upon these "qualities" that their virtue and merit within the stories rest (1991, 346-7).

Journalists constructed Homolka's story in a similar fashion. In one example that highlighted her Snow White-like connection with animals, Jim Rankin of The Toronto Star quoted Homolka's former boss, at the veterinary clinic where she assisted, as saying, "Somebody who works with animals, and particularly someone who wants to make it a profession - I think one can use that as a measure of her sense of caring for life. Regardless of what happened, Karla Bernardo is another victim" (1993, A6). Later in the same piece, Rankin spoke to a neighbour who said, "You know who [sic] I really feel sorry for? It's Karla" (A6). What emerged from this coverage was a grossly simplified portrait of a quiet, animal-loving girl who got along well with everyone and simply fell victim to a bad guy with a deceptively smooth appearance.

Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech* argues that "We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory" (1). Language could not injure us "if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be" (Butler 1997, 1-2). Her argument focuses on hate speech and how being called a name can cause pain, but part of her implication is that all name-calling is not necessarily injurious. For instance, being called a name is one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language or called into being. She writes that while being called an injurious name is demeaning, "one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate the call" (2). So by calling Homolka a "victim," the media called her into being as part of a social category along

with all prior assumptions that this particular name connotes. She is now constituted as something she was not before she was named. While the term clearly suggests passivity, it paradoxically also has power.

In this sense, the power offered is liberation from obligation, for once Homolka was called victim she could not be held responsible for the situation in which she found herself or her actions - any of her actions - because the concepts of victim and responsibility have been constructed as diametrically opposed in language. Like Snow White, or any other of the innumerable unnamed princesses with which North Americans are familiar, Homolka was the victim. The conflation of this name and that of "princess" liberated her from the incriminating other option: being an autonomous individual with the freedom (and responsibility) of choice. Princesses (and Homolka) do not have agency in traditional, non-feminist fairy tales or, in this case, in real life.

A short time before Bernardo's murder trial on May 31, 1995, The Toronto Sun ran a front page photograph of Homolka with both eyes blackened. This photographic representation of her as victim augmented the textual evidence of her status and made her situation even more "real" to newspaper readers. We in the Western world comprise a culture that privileges the eye for discerning truth (Tagg 1988, 7-10). For the average newspaper reader, actually seeing a photograph of Homolka looking like a victim (and in this particular instance, she was the victim of her husband's aggression - he beat her with a flashlight and she left him) confirmed and legitimized what the text stories had been saying all along: Homolka was helpless against Bernardo. He was the aggressor, she the aggressed. That this message was all-important was supported by its prominent placement in the newspaper: as the only photo occupying the entire front page.

John Tagg, in *The Burden of Representation*, quotes a manual of police photography at length in order to demonstrate how the legal system (police officers, lawyers and the courts) values photographs as evidence. There is no place for the relativity of truth in police photos; they are supposed to be used in conjunction with other evidence to enable "a true picture to be obtained" (Tagg 1988, 95). One segment of the manual discusses how crime photographs have an aura of objectivity, and that they can convey a true

representation of the situation (Tagg 1988, 98). Tagg makes the link between the legal perspective of the photograph's clarity and its straightforward printing process, and the correlative idea that this approach guarantees objectivity and accuracy for police. It is as if the photograph has a one-to-one correlation between representation or image, and reality. By looking at the picture, one would see the scene exactly as if one had been there. Tagg writes that the police believe photographs are direct transcriptions of the real. "The falsifications that can occur - cropping, retouching, interference with the negative - are only perversions of this purity of nature. Behind every distorted or inadequate photograph is a truth which might have been revealed - that 'brute photograph (frontal and clear)' of which Roland Barthes once dreamed" (1988, 98). As Barthes (1972), Bill Nichols (1981), and numerous others have noted, every text - including a photograph - is a cultural product whose meaning is carried out or constructed within a certain framework. It is the framework that gives the discourse its fixity. Tagg argues that the dominant form of signification, the realist mode, offers fixity. The signifier is seen as identical to a pre-existent signified. "It is this realist mode with which we are confronted when we look at the photograph as evidence" (1988, 99).

The photograph of Homolka with eyes blackened is a realist text. It is based on a limited plurality of language but is subject to definite closure: it expressed or communicated a pre-established concept, that Homolka was a victim. The effect of seeing Homolka like this conveyed to readers a seemingly simple truth and initially many readers were convinced not only of her victim status, but also of her innocence. The issue is that newspaper readers do not consider the fact that photographs are social constructs. Instead, they "confuse the realms of the image and the physical world by treating the image as a transparent window (especially the photographic image)" (Nichols 1991, 21). Photographs, like news stories, are value-laden forms that imply a simple, straightforward view that does not exist.

What appears to be so obvious that almost none but the most basic of reporting texts notes is that all news stories require an element of the unusual to gain coverage. Implicit in news judgement or value is that coverage depicts events or people that are out of the ordinary; they are "new(s)." Paradoxically, part

of a journalist's job is to make news un-newsworthy - to explain the inexplicable, to render harmless the threat of difference and its challenges to the status quo. But in the case of Homolka, this was and continues to be the essential problem: how can she be explained? While the media tried to make her fit the stereotype of victim/princess, when she testified against Bernardo in 1995 it became apparent she was not a perfect match for a subservient princess. She insisted on arguing with the defense on everything from what she could not remember (her part in the sexual assault of Jane Doe, for instance) to the colour of her own eyes.¹ Instead of being submissive, pliant and shy, she was, as Rosie DiManno wrote, "lusty in her pugnacity" (1995, A6). This coverage conveyed the contradiction: on the one hand, she was protected by the legal system because she was Bernardo's victim and had agreed to testify against him. But on the other hand, as Homolka spoke for herself at Bernardo's trial, her words, tone and mannerisms appeared to contradict the quiet, helpless victim image. At this point, she did not appear to be passive at all. In the coverage, columnists such as DiManno clearly suggested the inconsistency between what Homolka claimed her character to be at the time of the kidnapping, rapes and murders, and the person she appeared to present in court (1995, A6). The question is: was Homolka able to use the fairy tale stereotypes against the legal and media institutions that had, in fact, created and maintained these simplistic images in the first place?

Part of what journalists had to confront is that there are no words or phrases that explain Homolka's psyche or behaviour. Patricia Pearson, in *When She Was Bad*, writes about how the "vocabulary of motive" (which offers terms and labels to help explain criminal motivations) applies largely to men and not women (1997, 40). In the Bernardo/Homolka case, the detectives followed numerous leads involving two men, not a man and a woman. Getting beyond that initial idea to consider that Bernardo and Homolka might be equal partners in these crimes challenged them. When the police first spoke with Homolka, what she told them "could translate into only one language: that of...the ideology of masculine dominance and feminine submission" (Pearson 1997, 40). So the language both the interviewers and Homolka herself used suggested that if she were involved in these dark tales, it was only because she - blond, beautiful, young

- had no choice in the matter. The self-justifying manner in which people explain themselves after violent behaviour is part of the vocabulary of motive and it has "less to do with personal truth than with commonly held beliefs" (1997, 40). Pearson suggests that people tend to explain their actions and justify themselves according to cultural scripts. While self-justification may be universal and human, "the vocabulary of motive is different for male and female offenders. Because we won't concede aggression and anger in women, the language we use to describe what they do is much more limited, and much more exonerative" (1997, 42). While in reality there are numerous and diverse violent acts that women do commit, the explanations for them fall into a few limited categories and play into "preexisting prejudices about female nature" (1997, 42). So it was difficult for journalists to explain Homolka's actions in other than submissive terms because they had to borrow words, phrases or terms from a vocabulary of motives that constructs men and women differently. For the media, Homolka and her behaviour were beyond words - literally. In order to try to explain her, journalists had to look elsewhere for images, terms, and character types. Often they reverted to the vocabulary of the stereotypical fairy tale - not the actual scripts of classic fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm or others, but a more generalized and fluid conception of these popular stories that could be gleaned from Disney movies, for example, which supply the same narrative elements as some of their literary counterparts. The media can borrow these popularized fairy tale forms because through the use of such familiar frames, people will "know" what journalists mean, will understand what they are implying, and even when there was a paucity of factual information, they could fill in the missing blanks with material from the fairy realm.

Once Homolka took the stand at Bernardo's trial in 1995, journalists had to make sense of the contradictions her testimony presented. Most no longer appeared to believe that she was "simply" a battered wife; the vast majority of commentary suggested they saw this as Homolka's convenient excuse. At this time, the representations of her began to change. No longer the princess, she took on darker shades as journalists hovered between trying to limit and control the threat she embodied, or conversely, to magnify and sensationalize her as "other" and sell a lot of copy.

A great deal has been written about woman as passive victim or princess in the classic stories (Zipes 1986), but few works deal with the other option for fairy tale women: the powerful, threatening, horrific monster - witches, giants, ugly half-human beasts, or perhaps only a fairy-tale stepmother. But the potential and often subversive power these characters yield is inspiring and terrifying. Barbara Creed argues in *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993), that the female monster terrifies in a way that is distinct from her male counterpart, and that the source of her power is her sexuality. The notion is not new: Freud initially linked man's fear of woman to his infantile belief that the mother is castrated. But Joseph Campbell writes in *The Masks of God* that long before Freud, there was an age-old connection between woman's sexuality and her depiction as both castrator and witch: "There is a motif occurring in certain primitive mythologies which is known to folklore as the vagina dentate - the vagina that castrates. And a counterpart, the other way, is the so-called 'phallic mother,' a motif perfectly illustrated in the long fingers and nose of the witch" (1976, 73).

But women are not simply scary; while women's sexuality renders them fearsome, it also makes them attractive and desirable (Kristeva 1982). Homolka illustrates this paradox perfectly. Many recent print articles have focused on her sexual behaviour in prison or made reference to her (still physically attractive) appearance. And to this day, there are several online fan sites dedicated to Homolka. A couple of them have claimed to have copies of forbidden pictures and videotapes. Two have stated baldly that they are supportive of Homolka and find the thought of having sex with her extremely exciting (for example, www.geocities.com/karla_fan/). Nicole Nolan in *THIS* magazine has commented on the mainstream media's obsession "with...Homolka's hair, figure and lips and turning her into a virtual porn star" (1995, 13). Moreover, Nolan has argued, many journalists have indulged in what she has called a "Karla free-for-all that included Rosie DiManno of the *Toronto Star* describing her 'ripe protuberant lower lip' and her 'exquisite body'" (1995, 13).

On the one hand, Homolka was frightening and repulsive; but on the other, she constantly demanded "to be looked at." The coverage clearly suggested these representations were constructed on the boundaries between apparent contradictions: Homolka

was human and not human, attractive and abhorrent, dominant and yet submissive. Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), offers the concept of the abject as a way to explore how identity is formed. For Kristeva, abjection is ambiguous: it both attracts and repels, but its presence is inescapable. By examining Homolka as abject, it is possible to understand both mainstream media's and the public's continuous obsession and fascination with her case. She was both victim and victor; both passive princess and monstrous witch. By reading about and discussing her, we as a society were not simply talking about the case; instead, we were interrogating the boundaries upon which we define ourselves as human and we reaffirmed our existence and justified our social and personal limits every time we re-negotiated these boundaries.

Kristeva writes that abjection refers to that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982, 4). The representations of Homolka were deeply disturbing precisely because they moved consumers to a place of complete breakdown of accepted meaning(s). But at the same time, these problematic representations helped delineate more clearly the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and between "us" (law-abiding, life-respecting, "normal") and "them."

The abject has radically subversive potential because it is "the place where meaning collapses" (1982, 2), the place where "I" am not. Because this other, this "not I" threatens life itself, it must be excluded from the living - jettisoned away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border that threatens self from not-self. But the abject must still be tolerated - for that which threatens to destroy life also continually defines it. Kristeva implies that every society is founded on the abject; all cultures must construct limits and expel the antisocial because the abject threatens the unity of that society by calling into question the very boundaries upon which it is built and maintained.

The bulk of recent coverage of Homolka fits into this category: even the bland stories about her life in prison reminded readers both of the fragility of the justice system and its "success" because she was not, at the time of these news pieces, a part of mainstream

society. Gossip-based stories like Paul Cherry's "Karla lives life of birthday cakes and baseball in 'adult daycare'" (2000) were mostly not "news" in the classic sense of being about a recent happening or event, but their appeal as an example of abjection cannot be disputed. By constructing stories in which the public could view Homolka in jail - beyond the barriers of "normal" society - people were encouraged to feel safe and could have their perceptions of self, culture and society constantly reified.

Boundaries are equally complex in most fairy tales. The stories themselves detail a crossing over, usually from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience (Bettelheim 1976). While there are examples of the abject in some of the older, classic tales, most of the well-known stories try to set up clear gender boundaries for the female characters, and challenging these limits rarely occurs. Women in these traditional non-feminist tales have clearly delineated roles and few choices: those who are young and beautiful spend their time waiting for princes; those who are mature and ugly concoct spells and wreak havoc. Homolka began by being depicted as the former and then became more closely associated with the latter. As the details of the charges and evidence against her leaked out, media professionals employed several other motifs, again borrowed largely from popular tales, to try to limit and control her threatening power. She was no longer a victim; she was inhuman. Her behaviour was degrading and depraved; she was, journalists said, "a monster," and the Crown had been forced to make "a deal with the devil" (Duncanson, Pron and Rankin 1995, F1; Ford 1996, A7; Williams 2003, 3). Catherine Ford, a columnist for Southam News, even predicted Homolka's metamorphosis into a particular sort of monster with attributes similar to the fairy tale witch. Ford wrote, "She will be about 35 years old [when she is released] and if a decade in a woman's prison hasn't fattened and coarsened her looks a diet of prison food and limited exercise will have. But for all that, she will have most of her life ahead of her. Homolka will look at freedom with those dead blue eyes and all she will see is a lifetime of running" (1996, A7).

The adjectives that Ford chose imply an unstated comparison to their opposites - upon her release, Homolka will be a mature woman, not young, and part of the fairy tale stereotype that "old" is witchlike. She will be fattened and coarse - ugly. The

implicit argument that Ford made is that losing her beauty will be part of Homolka's punishment - she will lose that which first made her valuable, that which helped protect her from full prosecution.

But such a conclusion also raises the enormously problematic point that society still judges women on these sorts of grounds. Homolka's punishment had little to do with solitary confinement, or isolation, or trying to function in a prison society; her punishment was that she would become undesirable and that is being presented by Ford as a legitimate and severe chastisement. This implicitly suggests the underlying ideology this journalist's words unwittingly reflected: in Homolka's case, the pervasive belief is that physical beauty and youth not only define women, but also determine their desirability and value. And the loss of these culturally defined characteristics constitutes appropriate punishment for rape and murder. That does belong in the realm of the fairytale.

There is a genuine need today to find new and different ways to tell these stories. While the themes and motives may be as old as the oral tradition itself, the borrowing of traditional non-feminist fairy tale characteristics by contemporary news media to explicate women like Homolka undermines all other more balanced approaches to gender construction and equality. The process is attractive because both media and consumers share a desire for accessible, entertaining stories, and the boundaries between fact and fiction and between news and entertainment, are blurred before the first word is ever written or broadcast. But as this discussion about the representations of Homolka has pointed out, choice of story frame, vocabulary and characterization are shaping and influencing the underlying messages of the news stories. The journalistic terrain is not a land ripe for "happily ever after" when both journalists and the public focus their opinions about and judgments of Homolka's crimes on outdated notions borrowed from a problematic and nonexistent "once upon a time." As Charlotte Ryan argues in *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing*, "every frame defines the issue, explains who is responsible, and suggests potential solutions" (1991, 59). In this instance, the fairy tale frame made it very difficult to either apportion blame for the crimes, or to suggest potential solutions to what appeared to be random violence, because the frame was too simplistic for the

complex personalities concerned, and it offered limited and sexist vocabulary that could not assist in an exploration of how our society might be responsible for the creation of a woman like Karla Homolka.

Endnote

1. In one exchange, Bernardo's lawyer said, "'You had been battered and abused and forced into doing this (killing [her sister] Tammy) by that guy in the next room and you just sat there with your blond hair and - what are they - blue eyes...' 'Green,' Ms. Homolka interjected..." (Makin 1995a, A4).

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