

“Villains, Virgins, Victims: Archetypes of Women in Folklore and Our Culture’s Misunderstanding of the Feminine” is a paper that focuses on the evolution of culture through folklore, and specifically on the ways in which women and the feminine are portrayed and interpreted. Tracing the trajectory of portrayals of women from ancient mythology to modern literary fairy tales, this paper aims to shine a light on the advantages and limitations of feminist arguments regarding folk tales and to expand upon the work scholars have done to analyze patriarchal influence in folklore.

The central idea behind this thesis intends to point out the limiting boxes that the patriarchy has used to label women, namely villains, virgins, and victims. The paper uses these examples to show how the patriarchy has used female sexual identity to define women’s morality. An example of this is the work of Charles Perrault, a prominent author who, in the seventeenth century, began adapting folk tales into the common fairy tales that we know today. An example of the villain archetype is the central female figure in the fairy tale “Bluebeard,” who is demonized for her curiosity and desires in a way that is both literal and sexual in its implications. Then, there is Cinderella, an example of the virgin archetype, a character who is praised for her obedience and lack of curiosity. Finally, Little Red Riding Hood represents the victim archetype and the ways in which the patriarchy excuses the violent behavior of some men.

At its core, this is a project about cultural perceptions of the feminine, and how folklore has reflected these ideas. This is a nuanced idea that is not easily defined, and it is important to show how folklore can be used to change cultural perception for the better.