Cinderella Around the World

Though most of us are familiar with the Disney movie of Cinderella, there are actually over 350 versions of this much-loved tale, which come from all over the world. The passing down of stories from generation to generation is one of the most ancient forms of recording history. The oral tradition of storytelling plays a major role in many civilizations and cultures. Despite differences in location or cultural traditions, some stories seem to come up again and again. Cinderella is one of them. Cinderella-type stories have been recorded in China, Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, India, Egypt, England, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Germany, several First Nations, Iraq, Portugal, Iceland, and France, to name a few! The character known in North America today as Cinderella has many different names: Peu d’Anisso, Aschenputtel, Allerleirauh, Cap o’ Rushes, Katie Woodencloak, Oochigeaskw, Little Two-eyes, Benizara, Turkey Girl Mjadveig, Vasilisa, Nomi, Ashpet, and more! Yet despite having different names, settings, or characters, the story remains recognizable.

Yeh-Shen (850 AD China)
This Chinese tale was the first Cinderella story to be written down. Yeh-Shen is an orphan living with her stepmother and stepsister in a cave. The stepmother kills Yeh-Shen’s only friend, a golden-eyed fish, and serves it up for supper. A wise man tells Yeh-Shen to save the fish bones, and they will grant her whatever she asks. When her stepmother and stepsister go to the cave festival, Yeh-Shen asks the magic bones for a beautiful jeweled gown to wear to the festival, and suddenly finds herself majestically adorned, complete with golden shoes. At the festival, she is worried her family has recognized her, and she leaves in such a hurry that she drops a shoe behind. The shoe eventually comes into the possession of the king, who sets out in search of its owner. When Yeh-Shen finally tries it on, it fits her perfectly. She produces the matching shoe, as well as the gown, and marries the king. He becomes greedy, asking the fish bones for riches galore, and they eventually stop granting his requests. Her stepfamily continues to live in the cave, and die in a shower of rocks.

Rhodopis (Egypt)
This version of the Cinderella story contains the earliest record of the shoe motif, which is used as a test for choosing a bride. As Rhodopis bathes one day, an eagle swoops down and takes one of her sandals. The eagle flies to the Egyptian city of Memphis, and drops the sandal into the lap of the king. The king, fascinated by its shape and size, sends messengers throughout the land to find its owner. They find Rhodopis, and bring her to the king, who marries her.

Billy Beg and the Bull (Ireland)
Billy Beg, son of the king, is hated by his new stepmother. She pretends to be sick, and claims that only three mouthfuls of Billy’s bull’s blood will save her. Hearing this, Billy and his bull run away. The bull gives Billy a napkin
which will always hold food, a stick which will transform into a sword when needed and give him the strength of a thousand men, and a belt made of his hide which will protect Billy from death. Billy hears that a nearby princess is in danger of death by a dragon, unless someone can kill the dragon first. The king will give his daughter in marriage to anyone who can save her. Billy succeeds by using his gifts, but runs away before anyone can see who he is. As he is rushing off, the princess manages to pull the shoe off his foot. She promises to marry whomever the shoe fits, and Billy goes to claim it. He and the princess are married.

The Little Red Fish and the Clog of Gold (Iraq)
In this story, a young girl begs her widowed father to marry a neighbour woman who is kind to her. Her father resists, but eventually they are married, and immediately the new stepmother becomes jealous of the girl. She treats her poorly, forcing her to do all the work. One day the girl catches a little red fish, who promises to help her when she is sad. A great man announces his daughter is to be married, and the customary gathering of women at the bride’s house is arranged. This event is an important opportunity for mothers of sons to meet unwed girls. The girl is left behind by her stepmother, but the fish gives her a gown and clogs of gold, making her promise to leave the gathering before her stepmother. On her way home, the girl crosses a bridge; and one of her golden clogs falls into the river below. The clog is swept by the current to the king’s garden, where the Prince finds it and decides to marry its owner. When he comes searching, the stepmother tries to hide the girl, but magic intervenes to reveal her and prepare her for the wedding.

Cinderella, or the Little Glass Slipper
(Charles Perrault– French)
This version of the story was used by Disney to create their well-known animation. It is also very close to the story that the Xstrata Ensemble Studio School Tour production tells. Perrault introduced the mice, rats, lizards and the pumpkin to make the coach and horses to take Cinderella to the ball. The ball goes on for three whole days, and every day she appears in a new gown. At her wedding, Cinderella forgives her stepsister and finds them husbands at the court.

Cinderella (The Brothers Grimm)
In this version, Cinderella’s mother is watching over her, like a good fairy. The stepfamily is very nasty, but the birds help her with her tasks, picking lentils out of the cinders. The birds also make the dress and shoes. She goes to the ball three times, each time with a different dress. The stepsisters cut their toes and heels off to try to make the shoe fit them, but are discovered when the birds tell the Prince that they see blood running out of their shoes. At the wedding, the same birds peck out the stepsisters’ eyes for being so mean.

Though the story is about a boy, can you still recognize the Cinderella pattern? How does the story change, and how does it stay the same if Cinderella is a boy?

Why does this story appear all over the world? Why is it so universally appealing?