

The Disneyfication of Folklore: Adolescence and Archetypes

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Abstract:

Fairy tales and folklore have long taught children to cope with things they are afraid of. These days, the fairy tales kids are familiar with are not the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Anderson, but Disney. The problem is, Disney has taken the archetypes represented in the fairy tales and gone Hollywood. The heroines are pure, beautiful and sweet and the heroes are a mixture of John Wayne and Brad Pitt. Instead of journeys and quests, there are chase scenes and knife fights. Friendly animals and song remove any evidence of the dark, forbidding German forests found in the Grimms' fairy tales. I examined *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast* and *Cinderella*, comparing the original texts to the Disney version. All of these stories have gone through retellings and revision; for example, Cinderella stories are found in ancient Egypt, but the problem is, Disney has forgotten these stories roots and purpose, i.e. preparing adolescents for adulthood, and created a whole new mythology. Some of Disney's stories represent the values of the time they were produced, for example 1959's *Sleeping Beauty* seems to represent the WWII wives waiting for their lovers to come home from war. However, I think students need to look beyond the animation and discover what these stories mean. They should compare the original text to the Disney revision and not just take Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* at face value. Additionally, there are other revisions that more clearly represent values young people hold true today, such as *Ever After*, where the Cinderella character fights for what she wants instead of waiting for her fairy godmother to bring it to her. Students could also use the web to review the different points of view of fairy tale and folklore revision and further critique of Disney.

Paper:

Disney may own ABC, Miramax and Touchstone pictures and can greatly influence what we watch, but can it also determine our culture's adolescent rituals? Folk and fairy tales have long served as a mechanism to help adolescents move from childhood to adulthood. However, most adolescents now only know one version of folk and fairy tales, not the Brothers Grimm, not Hans Christian Anderson's, but Disney's. Unlike the Grimms and Anderson, Disney does not provide roles for adolescents appropriate to their lives, but uses Hollywood tactics to revise, rather than retell the stories. Walt Disney and his studios have been much maligned for their treatment of folk and fairy tales. Frances Sayers, reacting to an editorial praising the storybook collection created from Disney's films, criticizes the alterations he makes in the "traditional literature of childhood" (Sayers 603). She says, "he shows scant respect for the integrity of the original creations of authors...His treatment of folklore is without regard for its anthropological, spiritual, or psychological truths" (Sayers, 603). Walt Disney's film, *Sleeping Beauty* and the resultant storybook version (Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, 1986), came out in 1959. In Walt Disney's defense, his source was a six-page story that needed to be stretched to fill a space of nearly two hours. "The Grimm's' version, "Little Briar Rose," runs barely four pages. The Perrault story, "La Belle au Bois Dormant," is six pages in its entirety" (Thomas, 30). Disney had to add to the story to fit a feature film time slot. Sayers contends he destroys "the proportion in folktales" (Sayers, 602). She says, "Folklore is a universal form, a great symbolic literature which represent the folk. It is something that came from the masses, not something that is put over on the masses. These folk tales have a definite structure. From the folk tale, one learns one's role in life, one learns the tragic dilemma of life, the battle between good and evil, between weak and strong...There is a curious distortion of all these qualities in Disney's folk tale. He does strange things. He sweetens the folk tale" (Sayers, 602). Disney does create friendly animals that did not exist in earlier tales, however I disagree that he does not tell of the battle between good and evil. The

evil in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* is blatantly evil. Evil is represented by a powerful enchantress rather than just a disgruntled fairy. This changes the focus of the Grimm's and Perrault's versions from the metaphorical use of the pushed aside, useless and forgotten old woman (the Queen Mother or dowager) to the 20th century comic book battle of good vs. evil, "It is fundamentally a triumph of good over evil...The Prince, armed with the sword of truth and the shield of virtue, represents good" (Thomas, 129). Maleficent considers herself the supreme power of evil. It is so inconceivable to her that anyone could overcome her power that she doesn't even pursue the Prince as he escapes her castle" (Thomas, 129). Maleficent evil character is similar to the disenfranchised Queen Mothers and Stepmothers in the earlier tales. "Disney's evil females are magnificent in their strength, presence and rage. Visually, they loom large and dark on the screen as they trick, manipulate and threaten. They control others' options, and access to money, shelter and relationships with men. These evil females are often alienated from their communities. In Disney tales, evil women are motivated by the desire to have what isn't theirs-purity, beauty, acceptance, love" (Henke, 244).

The Prince, who up until now had a walk-on role, only had to show up on time, "The Prince was always a problem. The Prince in *Snow White* had appeared only at the beginning and end of the picture, being virtually a complete stranger to the plot (Thomas, 31). In previous versions, "its hero is the only one in all fairytale who has no doughty task to fulfill, no dragon to slay, no water of life to discover, no giant to bring in chains to court; he merely has to arrive at the right time" (Travers, 82). The Prince in *Sleeping Beauty* is different from the prince in *Snow White* because he is on a quest. He is not just seeking just any princess. He is seeking his one true love. This changes the meaning found in earlier tales however, it does not make it mean less. The characters in folk tales are archetypes. They each represent something. In earlier versions, *Sleeping Beauty* seemed to represent resurrection. Disney had to make his characters stand for something a modern audience could relate to, and give them enough depth of personality to maintain interest for two hours. Therefore, their meaning changed. The Brothers Grimm's prince represents all princes, married off to the appropriate princess at the appropriate time. Disney's prince is motivated by romance and true love. As a post-World War II character, he has to be noble and heroic. This creates a new archetype. Instead of a reawakening into adulthood, *Sleeping Beauty* wakes to her one true love. Young women in the 1950's aren't being married off by arrangement, but are waiting for their prince to come. The later Disney revisions follow this same formula, even though young adult women's values have changed. Modern values override the archetypal storyline in *Beauty and the Beast* as well. Madame Gabrielle de Villeneuve wrote the first version of *Beauty and the Beast* in 1740. Disney has made many changes from that original. For example, there is a battle in the end of the Disney movie instead of a journey. Disney made the final scenes a fight between two guys over girl, diminishing her role. In the original version, she has returned to him after a visit to her family, deciding to return to him out of a sense of duty, and a love she does not realize until she fights through the forest and reaches him. Again, the meaning is lost in the Disney retelling. Disney tries to return to the archetype and in the end, as the Beast lay dying, she does declare her love for him and he transforms into a prince. Belle seems like a good role model, she reads and sees through Gaston's handsome exterior, but she still is demeaned into a prize to be protected and won by the end of the movie.

Structurally, we've lost *Beauty* as hero: she who instigated the action by asking for a rose no longer asks for a rose; she who almost killed the Beast with her lack of perception but instead saved him by developing perception becomes an observer of two guys fighting over a girl. May the best man win. He does, but the woman has lost in the process. It's not enough to pay lip service to women's intelligence by propping a book up in front of a gorgeous female or showing her disdain for a macho suitor, when she's been denuded of her real power. Doesn't all this reflect and ongoing condition in our society? Some of us don't like what we see here because we are seeing what's happening to us. (Hearne, 102)

Belle does not request her father bring her a rose, and he does not take a rose from the Beast. He simply goes in an open door after being lost in the woods and is held prisoner for trespassing. Belle is no longer the dutiful daughter, going to the Beast as payment for the theft of a rose, but takes her father's place because he is sick. Yes, that does seem noble, but doesn't her later action seem a bit like Stockholm syndrome, if she is indeed a prisoner to begin with? Belle is repeatedly rescued by others both by Mrs. Potts and by her son, Chip, again demoting her from the role of hero. Young women in the 1700's were often sent off to arranged marriages that seemed frightful. This story taught them that they could learn to love and leave their families and childhoods behind. Disney uses a chase scene to get Belle back to the Beast instead of allowing her to make the trip out of duty and love. Other critics have complained that Disney has created an abusive situation, not a love story. Some argue that young women will think they can change a man who acts like a beast and will end up abused.

In the original story, the Beast looks terrible and frightening, but he is really kind and gentle. The message of the story is that you should not judge someone by what they look like. An ugly outside can hide a loving heart. Disney changed this. The company decided to create a Beast with a 'very serious problem'. Disney's Beast terrifies his household and frightens Belle, his prisoner. The Beast does not attack Belle, but the threat of physical violence is present. In the Disney movie, Belle changes the character of the Beast. Her beauty and sweet nature change him from a beast into a prince, from someone who is cruel to someone who is kind. So the movie's message is very different from the fairy tale. The movie says, if a young woman is pretty and sweet natured, she can change an abusive man into a kind and gentle one. In other words, it is a woman's fault if her man abuses her. This is another dangerous message for young girls because it is not true, if Belle lived in the real world she would almost certainly become a battered wife. (<http://www2.gol.com/users/bobkeim/Disney/diswomen.html#beautybeast>)

However, I think Walt is in the clear on this point. The Beast isn't a man who acts abusively; he is really a BEAST, transformed by an enchantress. I think the critics focus too much on the 20th century meaning of the word beast. Even the Disney critics in the Mickey Mouse Monopoly documentary agree with me,

And Belle does not approve of or submit to the Beast's abuse or violent rages-she refuses to eat or come out of her room; she is attracted to his sweetness and kindness only after he begins to transform himself. The terms of his curse require that he learn to love another and earn her love, an explicit acknowledgment that it is he who must change his unforgivable behavior. And it's also clear that Belle rejects the macho masculinity of Gaston; in fact, his sexism and aggressiveness make him the villain of the movie.

Disney's *Cinderella* follows the basic storyline of most Cinderella archetypes. Even the Egyptian Cinderella story, where the heroine is named Rhodopis, the fit of the slipper is a defining characteristic. Disney's revision does focus more on Cinderella's relationship with the animals than with the fate of the stepsisters, one of which loses her eyes in an earlier version. This is another sweetened version of the tale. Other elements are consistent. The fairy godmother rescues her and once she appears dressed as a princess, it is all the prince can do not to fall in love with her. His quest ends when the shoe fits and he finds his princess. Modern revisions of this story, such as *Maid in Manhattan* follow this example. The prince (or wealthy man) meets a woman transformed by beautiful clothes or mistaken identity and falls in love with her despite her lowly beginning. There have even been pop psychology books written on this subject, where women wait for men to discover them in their lowly lives. We make the mistake of assuming the archetypes of two centuries ago will fit our perceptions of today. We like to apply the fairy tale archetypes to our lives, and get upset when they don't fit our modern ideas. For example, the passive princesses drive feminists crazy, "suggesting to them (the children) the limitations that are imposed by

sex” (Lieberman, 185). However, there are two ways we can make the princesses work for us today. First is to understand she was of a different time and therefore a different culture than what we live in today. A princess’s role in the 17th century (and even sometimes today, for example, Princess Diana, Audrey Hepburn in the movie “Roman Holiday”) was to marry the prince most advantageous to the kingdom and to look good doing it, “...marriage constituted a major event in noble families. Family ties were at once political alliances, systems of clientage and patronage, and conduits of power. Extended kin groups at these upper reaches of society acted to exert or gain control of politics” (Smith, 28) Today’s young women want to choose their own path. The young women of the 17th and 18th Century did not have that choice, and these tales reflected and perhaps assuaged their fears of arranged marriages. Like choice, love was not an issue, “...family councils, mediators, and royal ambassadors arranged marriages among the nobility according to strict principles and through careful negotiation. As a result, personal interests of prospective couples carried little weight. Balking at a politically advantageous marriage, a young Polish noblewoman received this warning from her mother: ‘If you do not do my will you will not have God’s blessing and I will wish all bad things on you, and even if you lie under a wall I will not know you; but if you do my bidding, I will share my last crumb of bread with you’” (Smith, 28). In many cases, mothers were as evil as any stepmother. Another modern revision, *Ever After* creates a new archetype, more appropriate for today’s young women. The Cinderella is this story, Gabrielle, is not like Disney’s singing kitchen maid. She is described as

“not waiting around for a prince to rescue her; in fact, she often comes to his aid, offering him guidance, and even saving the prince’s life by carrying him on her back.” (<http://www.foxmovies.com/everafter/movie/synopsis.html>)

The director and co-screenwriter of the movie, Andy Tennant, explains, “I wanted a very different version of Cinderella because I have two daughters, I did not want them growing up believing you have to marry a rich guy in a big house in order to live happily ever after” (<http://foxmovies.com/everafter/movie/synopsis.html>). Tennant’s Cinderella story is an adventure with Gabrielle’s transformation coming from inside rather than from a fairy godmother. There is much more to discuss in comparing new and old versions of folk and fairy tales. Each culture and generation has its own tales that reflect their values. Students need to look at the revisions critically and discover if the meaning given to the archetype is true to its original meaning, or contrived by Hollywood. In many ways, young women today can still see themselves in the original folklore archetypes. For example, a study on suicidal teenagers, entitled “Sleeping Beauty” draws parallels between Sleeping Beauty and teens that use drugs to sleep, and sometimes to overdose to achieve a state of dreams, and even death. Bettelheim wrote of the “quietude” of adolescence. Some teens find sleep more inviting, hoping to continue their dreams. A modern teen might doze through adolescence and awaken in a different way, to their sexuality, to their plan for their life, to adulthood. Students of these tales can find a wealth of information on the web in journals and books that multiply every year. Feminist revisions have been printed and other versions of the tales can be found in bookstores or the library. It would be a good investigation to see what kind of tales today’s culture would produce in addition to researching and comparing original and revised tales, as well as their film versions.

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Cinderella (Disney, 1950)

Ever After (Fox, 1998)

Pretty Woman (Buena Vista, 1990)

Maid in Manhattan (Sony, 2002)