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What did Disney do?

As we all know, Disney is well known for its movies, especially animated movies. One of the most famous movies is called “Cinderella”. It is so famous that almost everyone on the world know this version, but not everyone knows the origin version of Cinderella. In fact, the origin version is an oral version and we cannot make sure what was it like, but we can still read the Brothers Grimm’s version which was a written version to learn the original Cinderella. Why should we do this kind of thing? Because there are many differences between Disney version and the origin written version, some differences are important and changed the story or even changed the ideology of the story. Jake Zipes’ “Breaking the Disney spell” helps us to recognize the differences and analysis them.

The Disney version of Cinderella is an animated movie, in which Cinderella lives a miserable life with her stepmother and two sisters, she is helped by the godmother and finally marries with the prince. The Brothers Grimm’s version is a written version, in which Cinderella also lives a miserable life with her stepmother and two sisters, but she is helped by a cow and a tree and finally she marries with the prince successfully. It seems that both versions are similar from the beginning to the end, but the ideology and many details are different.

In Zipes’ “Breaking the Disney spell”, he talks about the Disney spell. Although he clarifies that it is not right to say Walt Disney has ruined the classical fairy tales, he still writes this sentence: “But it would not be an exaggeration to assert that Disney was a radical filmmaker who changed our way of viewing fairy tales, and that his revolutionary technical means capitalized on American innocence and utopianism to reinforce the social and political status quo.” Zipes thinks Disney’s revolutionary technical is to reinforce the social and political status, maybe he is right, but it is undeniable that Disney’s movies have changed our way of viewing fairy tales. Just take Cinderella as an example.

There are two important differences between Disney’s version and Grimm’s version. One of them is the father of Cinderella. In Grimm’s version, the father is alive, he brings the branch to her and he thinks about Cinderella when royal servant is looking for the host of the glass slipper. Although the father of Cinderella is alive, she still lives a miserable life. While in Disney’s version, the father of Cinderella was dead, and it is clearly that Cinderella lives a happy life when her father stayed with her. In Disney’s version, Cinderella’s miserable life has nothing to do with her father, and it is all because of her bad stepmother. Why Disney changed the death of Cinderella’s father? Because the ideology is different. Brothers Grimm’s fairy tales are written for people who could read and for people who could afford to read, so the audience were in a certain range. But Disney’s version is an animated movie, it’s made for all kinds of people and Disney wanted to make a profit and gain a reputation. Just as Zipes has written, he used revolutionary technical to make a wonderful story that people are willing to see and so he changed the original version.

Another important difference between Disney’s version and Grimm’s version is how Cinderella gets the ability to go to the ball and marries with the prince. In Grimm’s version, Cinderella is helped by a yellow cow and a tree which is from the growth of the branch brought by her father. The birds and the tree would give Cinderella everything she needs. However, in Disney’s version, Cinderella is helped by the godmother and she gets the glass slippers and the cart. Why Disney changed the way Cinderella get helped? It is also because of the different ideologies. In Grimm’s version, Cinderella misses her mother so much and she always “talks” with her mother, Brothers Grimm makes the tree, the cow, or even the bird emblematic of her mother, and finally she gets the help because of the love from her dead mother. However, in Disney’s version, Cinderella is helped by the godmother because of she is such a kind girl that would even help animals around her though she lives a terrible life. Disney wanted to teach people that you should be kind, and good person will finally get a good return. But the Grimm’s fairy tale seems just a story, just a story of Cinderella which is not very educational.

But we cannot say the ideologies of Disney and Grimm are totally different. In “Breaking the Disney spell”, Zipes said “There is no doubt that Disney retained key ideological features of the Grimm’s fairy tale that reinforce nineteenth-century patriarchal notions that Disney shared with the Grimm’s.” And what is this “key ideology”? Zipes said “No matter what they may do, women cannot chart their own lives without male manipulation and intervention”, and zipes said “one shared aspect of the fairy tale and the film is about the domestication of women.” I think this is indeed a common point of Disney’s version and Grimm’s version.”

We still take Cinderella as an example, no matter what Cinderella has experienced, the story has a happy end. And the end is that she marries the prince. That means her hopes and happiness depend on the prince, if the prince didn’t give her a chance and didn’t marry her, Cinderella would live a miserable life forever with her stepmother and her two sisters. At this point, I think Zipes is right, even though we don’t like it right now.

Zipes said “Disney employed the most up-to-date technological means and used his own "American" grit and ingenuity to appropriate European fairy tales.”. I think this is also a great comment and summary for Disney. For example, in the story of Brothers Grimm’s Cinderella, when the royal servant is finding the master of the glass slippers, the bad stepmother forces her two daughters to cut some parts of their feet to adjust the glass slippers because of their big feet, which I think is bloody and not suitable for children to read. At this point, Disney has done a good job, he changes this plot into an implicative and gentle part. Cinderella’s two sisters have big feet and they are just angry and they finally give up, no blood, no scare.

What’s more, in Brothers Grimm’s version, finally Cinderella marries the prince, but the stepmother and the two sisters are punished by the birds, their eyes are taken away by the birds. However, in Disney’s version, Cinderella and the prince has a sweet kiss, but the stepmother and the two daughters don’t get their punishment. Just as Zipes said, Disney used his “American” way to change the stories, it is surely make the fairy tales spread widely and make all kinds of people learn about the fairy tales, instead of just a certain kind of people.

But the changes Disney has made to these fairy tales are more or less excessive, and I think this is the reason why Zipes said “it would not be an exaggeration to assert that Disney was a radical filmmaker”. These excessive changes really hurt the fairy tale itself. For instance, in Brothers Grimm’s version, the two daughters are bad, this is for sure. But they are also beautiful, they might be better than Cinderella in other areas. But when we are looking at the Disney movie of Cinderella, we will find that the two daughters are ugly, they are much uglier than Cinderella. In this kind of movies, good person is handsome or beautiful, bad guy is ugly or odd. If one is a positive character, then everything for him or her is perfect so that the audience can figure this character out easily. But it is against the original purpose of fairy tales. From these versions of fairy tales, what will the children learn? They will get the message from the movie fast and they will realize that if one has a good look, he or she would have a better life, and they will take it for granted. As for those people who have ugly appearance, they must be bad and they might even be laughed by their peers.

Now we can get the conclusion. Brothers Grimm’s version of Cinderella is close to the origin story of Cinderella, it is literal and is valuable to read, but its raw and cruel plots make it not spread widely. This is also the reason why the origin version of fairy tales didn’t spread widely in the past. Disney’s version of Cinderella has many different plots with the origin story, Disney makes it closer to people’s tastes, so it can spread widely. But it results in that people lost the ability to think autonomously when reading, and they kept the Disney version firmly in the mind.

Disney contributed to the wide spread of fairy tales, though the fairy tales have changed a lot. Finally, this sentence of Zipes may give us some inspiration: “Fortunately, the animation of the literary fairy tale did not stop with Disney, but that is another tale to tell, a tale about breaking Disney's magic spell.”

**Woks cited pages:**

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