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Rhetoric 105

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03/09/16

Argument Against Disney’s Monopoly on Fairy Tales

For as long as children have had trouble falling asleep, there has also been fairy tales. Passed down from generation to generation, these simple stories have entertained and taught young people simple morals and ideals. One of the more popular and most cited of these tales is none other than Cinderella. Ranging from Perrault's "Donkeyskin" to the very famous Grimm Brothers' version of "Cinderella," there are many different variations of this famous tale; however, if you asked most people about the story, they most likely would reference the 1950 Walt Disney classic. In a last ditch effort to get the company out of debt after the flop *Fantasia,* they released *Cinderella.* Almost immediately it was a huge hit. In a ripple effect, Disney took over the so-called “fairy tale business” in a monopoly-like way. Based on this cultural relevance in society over fifty years later, Disney clearly changed the way people thought about fairy tales. Many people have taken notice at the fact that Disney controls every aspect of fairy tales, and one of the people is German critic Jack Zipes. Zipes firmly believes that this stranglehold over these tales is defective, and they detract from the original meaning of these tales. I mostly agree with Zipes on this issue, as Disney’s *Cinderella* and other movies have almost no relation with the original oral versions of the respective stories. It should, however, be taken into account the other side of the argument, which is that without Disney, our modern society would have almost no knowledge of these fairy tales.

One of Zipes’ point is that the only “magic” Disney had was his ability to animate fairy tales that looked nice and appealing, but had no underlying meaning to them. Disney was a revolutionary in bringing the fairy tales to the big screen. His animations are wonderful and grand, and the audience loved it, even without the original meaning. Many of the original fairy tales were somewhat gruesome to an extent. For example, in the original Grimm Brothers’ version of Cinderella, the ugly step sister tried to make the glass slipper fit by cutting off parts of her foot, resulting in a bloody mess. Another bloody part is right at the end, where the stepsisters have their eyes pecked out by birds, which is where the story’s moral comes into play. The sisters were envious and wicked towards Cinderella, and for that they were punished for life-long blindness. There is no such punishment in the Disney version, as the step-sisters get off fairly easily for their wickedness towards Cinderella. Their only punishment would be not marrying the Prince. Another point Zipes states is, “Private reading pleasure is replaced by pleasurable viewing in an impersonal cinema” (352). What he means is that while the movie version is much more visually pleasing, the interpretation of the story becomes bland and uninteresting. Instead of privately reading the tale and interpreting the plot for yourself, the plot seems to be one dimensional and uninspiring. The only plus is the animation techniques employed by Disney. Thanks to Disney, fairy tales have changed for the worse, as the lack of meaning gives them no point besides for a colorful story with no backbone.

Zipes states towards the end of his article that “Disney always wanted to do something new and unique just as long as he had absolute control” (351) The Oxford English dictionary defines the word control as “The fact or power of directing and regulating the actions of people or things; direction, management; command.” Disney wanted the films to be done his way, even if that meant changing everything about the original tale. From the beginning of his animation career this has been true. *Puss in Boots* (1922) is a very good example of his controlling mindset. He basically stole the title and made his own story, as his version has almost nothing to do with the original Perrault version. The original story is about a cat who is a the verge of death, but uses his cunning and wit to outsmart a king and ogre to survive. Zipes believes that, on a symbolic level, that Perrault’s story represents the class issues of the time. The Disney version has no such similarities, as his story seems to be an autobiography. I believe that Disney easily could have reflected the original version, as this was during a time where race was a very huge issue in the country. Instead of an autobiography, I think he should have made it about race, while keeping the same story arch from the Perrault. Zipes states, “He robs the literary tale of its voice and changes its form and meaning” (344). Disney could have made the story about class, but he chose not to. Disney’s artistic liberties and manipulation of the original is also shown in Cinderella as well. Throughout the entire film, Cinderella is helped out by many mice, but two in specific, Jaq and Gus. These mice in Cinderella have no other purpose other than to move the plot forward. Without them, Cinderella would have ultimately failed her goal. There is no evidence of mice in either the Grimm or the Perrault version, and these are clearly just a creative touch by Disney to put himself in control of the fairy tale and leave no remnants of the original story. Plus it helps appeal to children much more easily. Zipes’ believes characters are like this in all of Disney films, when he says “Though the characters are fleshed out to become more realistic, they are also one-dimensional and are to serve functions in the film” (351). Disney always tried to make the fairy tales his own, and this actually seems to be detrimental to them, since added characters and story arcs take away from the original message.

While Zipes is clearly against the monopolization of fairy tales through Disney, it is smart to take a look at the other side of the argument. Disney very clearly changes many parts of the original story, and many people do not like him for this because it seems he is basically stealing the aesthetic of the tale without substance. Yet, every other storyteller before him has taken artistic liberties as well. Disney remains to be the only one criticized. Some of his scenes have become iconic, such as when Cinderella life magically transformed into the world of her dreams by her fairy Godmother. Even though this scene is not in the original stories, it became one of the most popular scenes Disney has ever created. While it is not known who the true founder of fairy tales such as Cinderella was, every storyteller puts his or her own little twist to make it their own version. A lot of the original stories were written and told the way they were because of where and when they were being told. Since most of the stories started out in Europe, it makes sense for them to have a very heavy European influence on it, whether it be the influence of the French Perrault, or German Grimm Brothers. It makes sense for these versions to be more gruesome, with eye gouging and foot chopping, because that is just how life was back in the time period that these authors lived in. Death surrounded them on a daily basis, so of course it will appear heavily in their own work. Disney, on the other hand, lived in a time where this was not as commonly accepted for death and violence to be portrayed in media.. He has every right to make the stories more child friendly, and that’s exactly what he did. I believe he should have given more credit to the original, more famous authors, instead of just putting his name of the opening title card. He should have had more allusions towards Perrault and Grimm. Another point to bring up is the fact that if Disney never decided to write his own versions of the fairy tales, it is very likely that we would be talking about the original authors today at all. Thanks to Disney, these stories become household names. While you may not know who the original authors are initially after seeing a movie, you are just an internet search away from finding out, and from there you can find every other story that they have produced. Without Disney these stories could have faded into oblivion, and our society today would have never had a chance to read or hear them. Even though the stories are heavily watered down, Zipes’ needs to give credit where credit is due. Disney created an empire where kids and adults alike can watch happy feel good stories, and because of that they will never, ever be forgotten.

Zipes is clearly very against the Disney way of telling fairy tales, and he rightfully should be. Ever since Disney took over the fairy tale business, he completely changed the way fairy tales are told and viewed in our society. Instead of being stories about interesting characters and having valuable morals, he turned them into pretty musicals with a small amount of story and character development. No one really learns anything at the end, and everyone lives happily ever after. While Disney obviously targeted these movies towards kids and their families, it would not have hurt him in the slightest to have added even just a touch of morality to characters and have them all learn something in the end, instead of kissing the aesthetically-pleasing prince and riding off into the sunset. Without Disney, I don’t believe that these stories would have made it into our modern society at all. He created a bridge between generations that brought many classic stories to the big screen and living room. While I personally don’t believe Disney’s version can hold a candle to the many original versions, I don’t think I would have ever these stories without Disney. Overall though I do agree with Zipes’ for the most part. While Disney helped immensely by bringing these stories to modern society, it is hard to get past how watered down the stories are. They are visually appealing, but most of them lack substance. These stories were created to have a moral in the end, so if you take out the moral and meaning, you have yourself a Disney film.

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