Fairy Tales and the Context of Disney

For most Americans, Walt Disney's animated versions of fairy tales are the most familiar. In *Breaking the Disney Spell,* literature critic Jack Zipes defines Disney as both a revolutionary and an unfortunate interpreter of fairy tales. Zipes highlights Disney's successes and shortcomings as part of a larger discussion of the social implications of fairy tales and the idea of the child as the target audience. Zipes is generally a Marxist critic, focusing on the role literary fairy tales had in separating people by wealth and education status. For Zipes, fairy tales and folk tales reflect the values of a society, and his essay clearly demonstrates an attempt to place fairy tales within their social and historical context while specifically highlighting the effects of fairy tales as designed by Walt Disney.

Zipes defines the folk tale as an oral story "intended to explain natural occurrences" and bring people together (333). This places the folk tale securely in the realm of the community, as stories are passed down from generation to generation without written record. In this way, storytelling was the product of communal efforts, and folk tales thus reflected the values of an entire society and provided a means to teach those values to children. The invention of the printing press and the rise of literary folk tales, Zipes argues, resulted in sanitized versions of traditional tales for children, although fairy tales were not deemed entirely appropriate for children until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (336). For a time, then, the printing press actually decreased the accessibility of fairy tales to children. Furthermore, these printed texts were generally accessible only to the wealthy (336). This resulted in an overall shift in how fairy tales were received and understood:

> "We have already seen that one of the results stemming from the shift from the oral to the literary in the institutionalization of the fairy tale was a loss of live contact with the storyteller and a sense of community or commonality. This loss

> was a result of the social-industrial transformations at the end of the nineteenth century" (341).

What was once a oral, communal activity became more heavily focused upon the private realm, although oral traditions did continue to an extent (335). These two divergent traditions resulted in a greater social schism, as the literary fairy tale was reserved for the elite and the oral folk tale largely became a tradition of the lower classes. As Zipes argues, however, industrialization itself was not completely negative, as literary rates spread and the standard of living generally improved (341). Still, Zipes maintains that there was a significant difference between the two traditions.

Part of Zipes's argument relies on the supposition that there was a great thematic difference between oral folk tales and literary fairy tales. The ruling classes, who printed and read fairy tales, could instill "notions of elitism and separatism through a select canon of tales geared to children who knew how to read" (337). This argument holds in the sense that the tales as read by children were "cleaned up" by editors like the Brothers Grimm, while the oral tales retained much of their original darkness. What is not clear, however, is whether this sanitation resulted in vastly different moral and social lessons. It would seem, though, that social and industrial changes resulted in a shifting purpose for fairy tales. No matter the overall content, the fairy tale has evolved alongside technology. Zipes argues that technology was the fuel for Walt Disney's reinvention of the fairy tale, and with that reinvention came a new set of functions and moral lessons.

Zipes praises Disney as a revolutionary, someone who dared to carve new paths in the worlds of both animation and fairy tales (343). Disney reinterpreted fairy tales and played into the "core of American mythology," as is evident through his use of the "infantile quest" (345). Because he brought fairy tales to the masses through the use of animation, fairy tales could once

more be enjoyed by children, and in the decades since Disney's first film, fairy tales have been reinstated firmly in the realm of children's entertainment.

For Disney, the story of Snow White presented many opportunities to present his own ideas about what America should be. Unlike the prince in the source material, Disney's Prince frames the overall narrative (349). It is the Prince who demonstrates the values of valor and wealth and who emerges as the hero who saves Snow White (350). Snow White herself is heavily domesticated, a perfect example of femininity for scores of young female viewers. Snow White also reflects the time period in which it was made, as the seven dwarfs exemplify the work ethic and American spirit that would be necessary for recovery from the Great Depression.

Zipes does criticize Walt Disney's focus on the commercial prospects of fairy tales. Zipes discusses Disney's refusal to credit his animators, a sign that he always needed to be in charge and put his own stamp on his projects. Disney also used technology not to fully reinstate the fairy tale as a story of the community, but rather to highlight his own ingenuity and spread his own messages about gender roles and the importance of maintaining a patriarchal society (352). Because of this, Disney was not quite successful in returning the fairy tale to the realm of the community. Though his stories could be viewed by the masses, they retained many of the same value messages as the earlier literary fairy tales.

Jack Zipes argues that fairy tales should be accessible to everyone, especially children, but his desire that fairy tales should not unnecessarily stratify society leads to his complex evaluation of Walt Disney. Disney's interpretations of fairy tales, though innovative, are not completely successful in Zipes's opinion, as they reinforce ideas of patriarchy, social status, and gender roles that have little place in our modern world.