“Disneyfication”: How Adaptation of Literature Affects Youth

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The adaptation of literature in the medium of film has proven to be difficult. When entering a movie whose plot is based off of a novel, audience members arrive with preconceived ideas of the movie, ready to compare it to the written work. More often than not, one will hear the viewers say something similar to how they liked the book better. Often times the film has changed the morals and essentials of the written story. What is not understood by the average viewer is that movies take away the imagination of the consumer, causing the audience to believe what the creators want them to believe. The plotline and appearance of the characters becomes concrete. While reading a novel, the interpretation is dependent upon the reader. With movies, it is quite the opposite. The audience does not have the liberty to create their own conclusions about the film, how it makes them feel, or what they believe to be the essential themes. The movies confine the imagination and projects their characters in a way which creates idealization. Movies, being motion images, are taken from the perception of a staff of screen writers, animators, producers, etc. Therefore, the ideal of the individual reader is nullified. Do these writers take it too far though? How does taking the imagination out of the process change the product?

Often times the theme of the original literature becomes lost in the translation to movies, especially those geared toward children. In Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams’ book, Beyond Adaptation: Essays on Radical Transformations of Original Works, it becomes understood that the transition to film is seen as a “text changed to suit a new purpose or environment but . . . the
new text is recognizable as a relation of the earlier text” (Smith 281). While the movie has snippets and makes allusions to the written story, the motion feature has become its own story, individual from the book. A new story has been created with different ideas and morals. The movie is simply based off of the novel, taking a similar plot and applying those plot points to motion features, not recreating the book. Frus and Williams, also in their book, recognize a new style of adaptation that has emerged, Disneyfication. This word was added to the Merriam Webster dictionary in 2006, the definition being, “the transformation (as of something real or unsettling) into carefully controlled and safe entertainment or an environment with similar qualities,” (Merriam-Webster). In short, Disney takes stories that are unsettling and adapts them to be appropriate for youth.

Since the 1980s, Disney has become a prominent force in the entertainment industry, having three main forces: theme parks, filmed entertainment, and merchandise (Forgacs 362). The imaginary Disney world has become the staple for the known folk characters in which children idealize Cinderella, Mulan, Hercules, and Aladdin, just to name a few. This Disneyfied version of the folklore is all of what America knows of many tales that have been passed down through the generations; Forgacs claims that anyone who was born after 1925, “were taken as a child to see Disney films, used to read Disney comics, and owned Disney merchandise;” are considered Disney babies, and Disney babies “grow ideally into Disney adults” who turn their own children into Disney babies; these “Disney babies” have been associated with Disney for their whole lives and may not even know of the tales in which they were inspired (Forgacs 361). As the definition stated, Disney adapts the story so as to be deemed “appropriate” for children. For example, the bloody sacrifices of the step-sisters in Perrault’s Cinderella are not seen, nor is
the tragedy of being soulless from Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* seen in the “safe” Disney movies.

What many do not know is that Disney has taken their characters from folktales that have been passed down for generations and used them to teach cultural beliefs, morals, and values to children. David Haase in his essay “Decolonizing Fairy-Tale Studies” observes that folktales “provide a more direct perspective on the life in traditional societies,” (Haase 3). Disney has adapted those folktales and Americanized them, which is interpreted as Disneyfication. Disney has capitalized on these ethnic tales, making 47% of their yearly revenue on the filmed entertainment of these characters (Forgacs 362).

Understanding what is meant by folklore is useful in this context. Often, people think of folk-tales as historical fantasies or fictionalized accounts. As far as folk-tales are concerned with modernity, they still have relevance and enjoy rich propagation. “There is some unfounded concern that folklore is likely to die.” Folktales are currently being created, the systems and the ideals behind them may become antiquated but they are an integral part of the popular and present discourse of society. Shen defines folk as groups of people that share commonalities. The commonalities create the culture and this culture creates its own stories (8).

Sayers says of folk-lore:

> It is a universal form, a great symbolic literature which represent[s] the folk. It is something that came from the masses, not something that is put over on the masses. These folktales have a definite structure. From the folktale, 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 folktale. He does strange things. He sweetens the folktale. (Friedmeyer)

While Disney animations are inspired by plots from folklore, the animations and the literature of that lore are significantly different. Many would argue that Disney has evolved the previous story into something completely different. The Disney movie, *The Little Mermaid*, based on the Hans Christian Andersen novel of the same name, is distinct from the novel. In it, Ariel is never forbidden to have contact with humans as in the Disney feature; rather, she is given permission to go to the surface when she is fifteen. Also, the incentives and desires for surfacing in each version of the princess’ departure are distinct. The Andersen’s princess has no desire to go to the surface until after she sees the prince. She goes to her grandmother with her love stricken heart seeking to learn more of the human race and learns from her grandmother that mermaids can only have a soul and become human if they can find a human that will share with them a deep love, deep enough to share their own soul with the mermaid. Disney’s Ariel, however, seems to have always had an interest in the human culture. This is observed in the movie as she sings of all the “neat stuff” that humans have. Her desires are more centered toward materialism. It is very apparent that she would prefer to be on land walking with legs rather than in the ocean swimming. Although her father has forbidden her and is constantly warning her to not come in contact, she “just [doesn’t] see how a world that can make such wonderful things can be bad” (Trites 146). R. Trites, in his essay, “Disney’s Subversion of Andersen’s The Little Mermaid” concludes “Ariel’s original motivation to become human seems very materialistic,” (Trites 146). The different mediums of the story result in having two completely different themes; the novel’s being that of a quest for love and a soul; and the animation’s being a quest
first to be free from the confines of parental authority and secondly to have the prince as her own.

Disneyfication is not limited to altering the theme of the tales; it also changes the purpose for the piece. Alan Dundes, a researcher of folklore defines “folk” as, “any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor,” (Shen 8). Therefore we can understand that folklore or folktales are stories of one’s culture and the formal and informal norms that one participates in. It can then be seen that the purpose of these tales are to exemplify culture, beliefs, and values. Disney takes the variety of folktales that are distinct to specific cultures and adapts them to American culture. This translation, as one may call it, alters the purpose that the tale had in the original culture. Rather than Disney’s movies continuing to have the same purposes that the versions in which Disney bases their plot off of, Disney rearranges the movies to better relate to their target audience: Americans.

An example altering the purpose of a work would be the Disney feature Mulan as compared to the Ode in which the plot is based. There are few accurate resemblances to the Chinese culture, such as that of embracing. In the movie there is embracing and much affection shown, while in reality those types of endearments are not deemed appropriate, even between the relations of a father and a daughter. However, many Americans would not understand this, so it was added to make the movie more relatable to the target audience. As mentioned, the movie is very much Americanized. Disney’s animation is based off of an Ode that had evolved into an oral folktale that was whispered among women in China with ideals of loyalty. The Ode discusses the love Mulan has for her father as portrayed in the movie as well as the cross dressing to pass as a man in the war. However, the “ancestors” in the animation are not accurate. Nowhere in the poem is there reference of a dragon that assists on Mulan’s path. This loose
interpretation exposes more of an archetypal quest, which is very much an American style of portrayal. Evidently, Disney has dramatized the original poem to such an extent the original purpose was lost. The original theme of the poem one understands as being loyal to oneself and one’s family while the Disney characterizes the strength of women and how they are capable of participating on the same level as the men. The focus then becomes more on the individual rather than that of sacrificing for the family as one sees it in the Ode. While this theme that Disney has created is an inspirational one, the integrity of the original lore has been lost. The recreation had a positive and inspiring effect on young women; however, it is not loyal to the original purpose or culture of the text.

It is not difficult to criticize Disney for the dramatic alterations from the original folklore. A. Waller Hastings condemns Disney “for showing scant respect for the integrity of the original creations of the authors . . . treating folk texts without regard for [their] anthropological, spiritual, or psychological truths” (Hastings 83). Often, readers and critics can become malicious about the variations from the folk tales. However, Naomi Wood in her essay “Domesticating Dreams in Walt Disney’s Cinderella” reminds her audience determining the ‘original’ of a widely dispersed folk tale is next to impossible. Instead Wood argues “Disney, just like any other artist, [has] the right to adjust written and oral stories to the demands of his medium and audience” (Wood 25). But how far is too far for a person to change morals, and in the end, create their own? And by creating their own moral, how does that shape the culture and reasoning of impressionable youth?

The adaptations recreate morals in the tales in ways that are not their original designs. While the underlying message of these renditions is meant to be for the family, the execution of such has become a major concern to our society. The Disney princess has been idealized and is
of special note since considering that she is the focal point and the purpose of stories being executed. It is upon her that the fate of kingdoms and people are decided within these tales. When youth identify with archetypes such as these princesses, there is often a logical fallacy involved in behaviors. Children are lead to believe that for them to become a princess they must take on the roll, lifestyle and views of the princess.

Media plays a very large role in the lives of children. “By the time the average child has graduated from high school, he or she will have spent 12,000 hours in the classroom and 18,000 hours watching television,” (Benenson, Stencel). With so much time in front of the television what is being viewed is a concern of parents. Studies on the theories of motivation posit that what we think leads to how we act, and these are habituated into our identity (Johnson 317). This can be both a positive and negative affect. As an example, violent depictions in television are believed to bring about behaviors that are more aggressive in children (Benson, Stencel). Disney certainly sends a more positive message than much media that is accessible to young audiences, less violent and gruesome should not be the only measurement of worth; Inappropriate coping skills could be just as damaging to individuals.

As previously discussed, Disney is a part of the modern folklore more than it has anything to do with the original cultures. The Disney tales often revolve around the princess as the main protagonist, or at least secondary. These new stories create a bond in society; people can relate to one another through them in “a common dialogue.”

Deszcz describes it as such:

It seems that it is this standardized vision that attracts audiences and makes the synthetic bliss of Disneyland so seductive. It is there that people can perceive themselves as members of one united community that shares norms and
values, and cherishes the same concept of happiness. Unfortunately, this feeling is actually an illusion, a short-lived escape from reality. Therefore, the question of whether it is possible to remove the spell cast by the wizard of Hollywood seems of particular relevance. (87)

Thus it is that the Disney princess gains celebrity status as a familiar icon among their audience.

“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” (Friedmeyer). We do not have any real princesses today. Certainly not the kind depicted in these fairytales. Princesses in history rarely had any power or say and any royal figures resembling them are mostly ambassadors or figureheads. The princess was not the empowering position which it has been fantasized to be. The Disney princesses however are given power roles. Interestingly enough these empowered women are given the spotlight in Disney tales, “she has remained a relevant anachronism over centuries, through revolutions, wars and globalization” (Rozario 34).

Disney films paint a picture about the cultures that are depicted in them, whether accurate or not (Murnane 1). Disney utilizes “[stereotyping and oversimplification]” (Murnane 5). Mulan, Pocahontas, and Jasmine add some color to the Disney lineup. It wasn’t until The Princess and the Frog came out in 2009 that there was a black princess. There is still plenty of skepticism from society about these additions. Not only is there stereotyping, but there is also a perception of “white entitlement” that resides on the rest of the princesses from the black community and other hard-won groups (Hurley 223). These ideals portrayed by Disney give a
false sense of entitlement which deeply affect the wellbeing of young women. This can cause belief that they don’t have to work because someday a handsome “prince” will come and rescue them from their sorrows and they will live happily ever after. Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and Cinderella are prime examples of waiting princesses who are white and have their happily ever after.

The “princess” in *The Princess and the Frog*, on the other hand, starts out in impoverished conditions and ends by marrying an exiled prince where they were able to live their dream thanks to hard work. While some groups may not be satisfied with her lowly condition, recognizing that Tiana has to make do with what life has handed her and making the best of it by working hard sends a much better message to the youth of today than the princesses who simply waited around for their prince to come find and save them. However, this can also be seen as being an over generalization or being very prejudice of Disney to categorize black Americans to be impoverished and whites to be born into riches, as Tiana’s best friend Charlotte is.

What happens to the cultures and stories in Disney is that they are transferred through other cultures and they are washed under the Disney spell. Some elements in the folktales are gritty and recognized by parental society as not for children. Transculturation is “a process of cultural transformation marked by the influx of new culture elements and the loss or alteration of existing ones,” according to Merriam-Webster. The original folktales were designed within the context of various historical cultures, using specific punishments or phrasing that related to that culture’s beliefs. It can help paint a background of understanding, as there is an amalgamation of cultures thrown in. But the problem is, there can be confusion for youth about the real cultures that are only partially depicted (Murnane). For instance, youth may be lead to believe that all
Asians have ancestors that follow them in the figure of animals as it is interpreted in Disney’s *Mulan*. This generalization can very easily lead to stereotypes, which can lead to discrimination, which entail can cause ethnic stratification among that race causing them to be more identifiable and therefore being more prone to be discriminated against (Aguirre, Turner 37).

Not only can there be confusion about the reality of world cultures, past and present, there can also be confusions relating to how life works. Disney’s Cinderella story has her scrubbing for her cruel stepmother. She is overlooked until she is given the chance to wash up and put on a gown. “Cinderella syndrome” is the term used to describe people who feel they are entitled to better things: jobs, material possessions, relationships, or treatment simply based on wishing, hoping, or waiting for them to come about (Goodwin, Cauthorne, Rada 1223). Through depictions of miraculous happenings that occur in both Disney and Hollywood at large, people come to believe that such things can happen and will happen for them if given time and little or no effort. Depression is often a major outcome of this when individuals fall into a slump of waiting and never receive any positive increases, or receive only marginal ones. The movie *EverAfter: A Cinderella Story* depicts a Cinderella who takes charge of her own destiny and doesn’t wait for any magic to occur. She models a strong woman who ends up saving the prince on numerous occasions rather than the other way around. However, this movie rarely reaches youth seeing as how it is not an animated movie, so the affects thereof are limited even though they may be positive.

Another factor that plays into folktales and Disney’s execution of culture seems to be the integral part of humanity’s evolution. Evolutionary theories posit that as the human brain adapted to its environment, it became more complex internally and outward streamlining. This translates into the transmission of culture, which is one way in which humans shared information with one
another. These cultural adaptations helped with the advancing brains as the knowledge shared benefits survival in two fundamental ways: protection and procreation (or mate selection) (Zipes 2). Boyd says that art aids in keening the mind of artist and the consumer. Also an artist’s own status becomes more prominent (thus assisting in mate selection). It bonds individuals with shared experience and lastly creativity is fostered which then seeps into other aspects of human life (Zipes 2-3).

Evolution theory can explain the usage of these stories and “how these narratives continue to resonate in our lives today by touching universal predisposed human drives for mate selection and mutual cooperation,” (Zipes 3). While we certainly don’t talk about the romantic elements of Snow White, Aladdin, or Sleeping Beauty in terms of mate selection and procreation, these stories certainly do deal with such matters. The men are stylized and idealized, such as Tarzan or any of the number of princes. Boys will model such behaviors just as girls will the princesses. This sets up role play, which leads into behavior (Johnson 317).

T.J. Johnson cites, “human beings as active, intentional, goal-directed agents,” (312). While these goals often include mate selection and preservation (through procreative acts which lead to proliferation), a more fundamental view is that “goals are contents of thought (or perhaps the end product of a specific operational methodology),” (Johnson 315). In essence, it is to say that goals begin as thoughts that are formulated to benefit the creature in some perceived way. These goals become part of the behavior that is exhibited. The behaviors are intended to achieve certain goals, whether these are effective or not matters only to the perception of the individual (Johnson 317-318). These behaviors are modeled from adults to children in the medium of film causing the children to desire what the adult characters in the films desire.
Another part of what makes Disney prominent in the lives of children is how they transcend a single medium. Characters spill over from the movies into any number of merchandised items. McDonald’s often serves up their fast food with a Disney toy in the McDonald’s Happy Meal not only to promote the movie but often to entice children to desire the meal to receive the toy. These characters are encountered in the real world, which perpetuates their story outside of the storied realm depicted on screen (Deszcz 83). To some scholars, like Jack Zipes, “The fairytale and its oral predecessor are not so much an expression of communal values or general humanist themes, but rather, indicate a particular social reality and reflect attitudes embraced by their originators in regard to their social environment,” (Deszcz 84).

What is being sold is not the morals of the past, but specially designed stories that reflect certain realities of the present, whether those realities are optimal or not. They are optimal for desirability, not necessarily for the good of society and the individual.

These characters are invasive within the real world. Backpacks worn to school, videos and games played at home, toys at the store, clothing lines and sing-a-long songs bombard the psyche of children. Most people cannot name off many real Anglo-American heroines, but they can list off the fairytale heroines that are associated with Disney. These cartoon characters become the role models, as opposed to the real people that have accomplished noteworthy feats such as Rosa Parks, Amelia Earhart, or Princess Diana (Stone 43).

Heroines are not allowed any defects, nor are they required to develop, since they are already perfect. The only tests of most heroines require nothing beyond what they are born with: a beautiful face, tiny feet, or a pleasing temperament (Stone 45).
They are immortal and timeless, unlike real people. These princesses are always young and beautiful; they never age. Such inaccuracies can impress upon young women negative self-image and negative self-esteem when they do not fit such stereotypes. It is no wonder that our society is obsessed with plastic surgery and looking younger.

In conclusion, Disneyfication certainly controls the understanding of culture and morals among the youth. But with understanding and informing the consumer of these fantasies and how they are not realities, there can be a cognitive shift in the direction of making outcomes less socially maladapted (Wohlwend 58). Folktales have been and will be a major part of society from childhood on up. If they are properly integrated into the learning model they can be re-scripted and rewritten at will, allowing for creative approaches and understandings (Wohlwend 80). As long as these stories are not taken out of context and lose their sense of purpose they can actually be a benefit to children. These types of stories will be accessed, and so it is imperative for teachers and parents to be involved in the discourse of the fantasy (Wohlwen 80). One solution can be to simply introduce alternate forms of the stories rather than giving the job to Disney to teach children of the lore. As long as children understand there are multiple interpretations (Hurley) of stories they can be better equipped to react creatively when coming upon decisions and making goals (Wohlwend 80). Doing so will make them less likely to model solely after any specific tales and any erroneous archetypes.
Works Cited


