

Collodi, disney, and the question of poverty in 'pinocchio': adding richness to a...

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The original text of Pinocchio, written by Carlo Collodi, is a propaganda filled, politically polarizing, piece of prose. Walt Disney's 1940 film adaptation, is an Americanized story of a silly little puppet who exhibits questionable moral judgement but, with the help of his conscious, saves his father, learns his lesson, and is magically transformed into a flesh and blood boy. One of the crucial differences between adaptations is that Collodi's Pinocchio is permeated by poverty. Pinocchio was written as unifying propaganda at a time of unrest in Italy. The Disney adaption has a similar feeling but in response to a different event. America was still feeling the effects of the Great Depression when the movie came out and the feel-good story, full of positive messages was what the people needed. In this context, Disney's removal of poverty from the narrative makes sense, however, by removing poverty Disney also removed a great many intrinsic parts of the classic. In the original, the hardships experienced by the characters, especially Geppetto and Pinocchio himself, are what make Pinocchio's selfish actions all the more deplorable, adding another layer of depth to the narrative. His poverty is also a large part of Pinocchio's motivation to be a good boy which removes some of the air of selflessness that absolves him of his immoral deeds at the end of the story. Finally, the poverty so accurately represented in the original text adds a taste of real world darkness to an often fantastical fairy tale which is necessary to keep it grounded in reality. Without these elements, the Disney version is a simpler story in a world far removed from that of the viewer.

In the original Italian story, poverty is what adds harsh morality to Pinocchio's foolish choices. The first example of this is when, even after

Pinocchio has him arrested, Geppetto willingly gives up his only food so Pinocchio can eat. Geppetto says “ These three pears were my breakfast, but I happily give them to you. Eat them, and it may do you good.” (Pinocchio 22) Collodi establishes early on that Geppetto is selfless and that Pinocchio takes advantage of him, which is the readers’ first look at his selfish nature. Pinocchio then makes a few bad choices, claims he will reform himself, and decides to go to school. Here again Collodi writes of Geppetto giving up his own livelihood for Pinocchio’s sake. Geppetto sells the coat off his back to buy Pinocchio the school book he needs. Soon after this, Pinocchio decides he wants to see a puppet show instead of going to school and “ the book was sold right then and there. And to think that poor Geppetto was sitting at home shivering in shirtsleeves from the cold just so his son would have a spelling book!” (29) Without Geppetto’s struggle, Pinocchio’s actions would be nothing but a foolish choice, however because Geppetto sacrificed so much and will suffer for it, Pinocchio’s stupid decision becomes a deplorable act of throwing away a sacrifice.

In the Disney film, the plot skips this point entirely. Poverty is not an established part of Geppetto’s life in the movie; his house is a magical haven filled with warm firelight by night and bright sunlight by day. He is a plump, rosy cheeked fellow, far removed from the gaunt man in the yellow wig Collodi describes. The school book is barely mentioned in the movie and it does not hold any of the same significance. When Disney’s fox and cat come along, they coerce a protesting Pinocchio with tales of the glory of the theatre. His choice to give up on school is not entirely of his own volition.

Where in the book it is a first sign of his selfish and immoral nature, in the movie, the corresponding sequence adds to Pinocchio's already established position as a naive innocent who is lead astray by wily tricksters. This is but one of many examples in the tale where Pinocchio's poor background makes his actions deplorable and the lack thereof portrays them as merely the ill advised decisions of a young boy. As the tale progresses however, poverty serves a different purpose. Near the end of the book, Pinocchio does reform himself and try to pay back his debt to both Geppetto and the Blue Fairy. This is his redemption, his transformation into a good boy and a real boy. At first glance it may seem as though Pinocchio has finally learned his lesson and is acting selflessly, but this is not wholly true.

Throughout the book, many of Pinocchio's attempts at reformation are motivated by poverty and the hardships that accompany it. This instance is no different. He is forced to take responsibility for himself and his father, as the latter is too weak to do so. Pinocchio's choices are to work or starve. It is true that Pinocchio rescued his father but without the poverty that they return to Pinocchio could not complete his full redemption arc. As Blue Fairy tells him in a dream, " Children who dotingly look after parents who are poor or sick always deserve great praise and great love, even if they can't be considered models of obedience and good behavior." (159) Hardship is a necessary part of his transformation and one of its greatest motivators, without it, as in the Disney version, the transformation has far less significance. In the film, after Pinocchio has rescued his father, they return to their comfortable house and comfortable life. Pinocchio is not forced to take

on responsibility to care for himself and his father and he does not become a real boy through doing so. Instead, Geppetto wishes Pinocchio was a real boy and the Blue Fairy appears and grants that wish. This changes one of the biggest lessons of the story completely. Without poverty forcing Pinocchio to work and care for his father, the story loses the lesson that being a good boy/person is linked to caring for your loved ones and supporting them in their time of need and becomes a story that finishes with the quote “ When you wish upon a star your dreams come true.” (Pinocchio 1: 27: 23) After a long stint in the fantasy world of fairy tales, Collodi returns to a more realistic description of home life at the end of his narrative. Geppetto and Pinocchio return to a civilized land, only to live in worse squalor than they did before their adventures, effectively placing the denouement of the tale back in the somewhat more realistic world in which it started.

In both the beginning of the tale and the end, poverty is described in a very down to earth fashion. Pinocchio attempts everything from begging to planting his money to avoid the difficult truth of being down on his luck but nothing works until he is willing to. Similarly to our world, there is no magic cure for hardship. Even the Blue Fairy, a goddess like figure who can turn a puppet into a flesh and blood boy, cannot escape the poorhouse when unable to work. The world the characters of Pinocchio inhabit is full of oddities, from talking animals to magical transformations, but poverty is the same in their world as it is in the real one. This makes it much easier to empathise with the characters and adds another solid link that ties the story to the readers’ lives. All of this is lost in the Disney version. Geppetto’s house

is as magical as any other setting in the story and because of this it is far removed from the audiences' world at the outset. From there the magical elements only get further from reality. The idea of Disney's Blue Fairy experiencing real world poverty seem ridiculous. Without a strong depiction of poverty and hardship opening and closing the story, not to mention running through it, it loses the framework of reality that ties Pinocchio's world with that of either the reader or the observer.

Throughout Collodi's Pinocchio, poverty adds complexity and depth to what would otherwise be, as demonstrated in Disney's 1940 adaptation, a more simplistic fairytale. The struggles endured by Pinocchio, Geppetto, and, eventually, the Blue Fairy turn Pinocchio's foolish choices into truly reprehensible, self-centered acts. This portrayal of Pinocchio continues through the entire story. Even when it seems that Pinocchio is finally acting selflessly, he is actually motivated by the life or death consequences of being absolutely destitute. While these are very real world problems for a magical puppet to be facing, and they seem even more out of character for a fairy, the fact that the characters in Collodi's world face the same hardships as people in the real world is what ties the magical to the mundane. This is one of the ways that readers' lives are reflected in the text. In removing the element of poverty from Collodi's story, Disney also removed some the harsh but universally applicable truths about hardship and morality that make Pinocchio a widely loved classic.