

# Literary adaptations and transformation: the changes disney has made to snow whit...

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Through the years, children have grown up watching Disney movies and television shows, as well as reading fairy tales through bedtime story books. Since its first animated film release, *Snow White* in 1937, Disney has since embarked on a long journey in becoming a common, staple entity for children from the late 20th century till today. Disney's influence can be seen everywhere, from the movies and shows that they watch on the screen to the lunchboxes, water bottles and stationary that children carry to school, Disney has a hold of many aspects of a child's life. Disney truly has entered the popular culture and isn't planning to leave anytime soon. New Internationalist dedicated an article titled *A Reader's Guide to Disneyfication*, addressing the growing presence of Disney in popular culture. According to the magazine, "The Disney machine has touched us all, spreading the values of the marketplace, colonizing the fantasy life of children and changing the world irrevocably in the process" (*A Reader's Guide To Disneyfication*, 1998). The article also says that "American media conglomerates like Disney... have near-monopoly control" in the entertainment industry. These effects are huge and "the result is Western (mainly American) domination of most forms of popular culture, especially books, music, movies, television and film" (*A Reader's Guide To Disneyfication*, 1998).

Adaptation, as defined by the Oxford dictionary, is "A film, television drama, or stage play that has been adapted from a written work" (adaptation | Definition of adaptation in English by Oxford Dictionaries, 2019). From Linda Hutcheon's book, *A Theory Of Adaptation*, adaption is defined as "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This "

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transcoding” can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel) or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view” (Hutcheon, 2014). In simple terms, it is nothing but the reworking of characters, plots and language of text into a new medium. Disney has for decades been adapting various fairy and folk tales and reworking them to animate them and present them on a screen. Movies like Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid, Rapunzel and many others have been taken from authors like The Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen along with many others.

In this way, some light can be shed on the term ‘Disneyfication’. It is a term which can be defined as, “the application of simplified aesthetic, intellectual or moral standards to a thing that has the potential for more complex or thought-provoking expression” (Klugman, 1995). As a consequence, Disney has sparked a lot of criticism, from both viewing public and scholars alike, greatly concerning the way Disney had altered the original storyline of the fairy tale and folklore in their films. Many critics object to the approach Disney has taken as an “overly simplistic, sentimental approach — the dumbing down” (Shortsleeve, 2004). This dumbing down approach did not require much critical thinking from the audience, they altered and oversimplified it to create the main subject as a specific romantic notion. So, some critics believe that Disney affects the general perception of fairy tales because Disney films create a definitive fairy tale consciousness among their audience (Zipes, 2013). Many critics suggested that the, “‘Disney version’ of a fairy tale often opts to ignore a majority of the more brutal and mature

aspects of the original fairy tales in favour of more light-hearted and formulaic pieces of leisure” (Reynolds, 2017). Renown psychologist Bruno Bettelheim has implied that Disney’s work is nothing more than, ‘empty minded entertainment’ (Bettelheim, 2010), and fully expresses that “ children now meet fairy tales only in prettified and simplified versions which subdue their meaning and rob them of deeper significance” (Bettelheim, 2010). A question that Jack Zipes poses in his essay *Breaking The Disney Spell*, is whether Disney founder, Walt Disney, has imposed ‘ a particular American vision on the fairy tale through his animated films that dominate our perspective today’ because of which we ‘ see and read classical tales through his lens’ (Zipes, 2013).

Research conducted by Elizabeth Tucker among American pre-schooler children in the early 1990s found out that these children’s knowledge of Cinderella and the Little Mermaid was entirely based on the versions which had been constructed by Disney (Tucker, 1992). This in a way shows how the literary adaptations overpower the original text.

Taking from a BA Thesis on Disneyfication of classic fairy tales by Litania de Graaf from Utrecht University, who conducted an online survey on 40 people, age from 18-29, we can analyse the facts to see that most Disney viewers were females, and that majority of the subjects had a faint idea of the original fairy tales, if not completely, and many of them knew of authors like The Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen and so on.

From these two surveys, we can see in children, they assume to believe the original story is as shown by Disney, but as they grow up with exposure to the original works through books and the internet, adults have a faint idea of the original fairy tales and original authors.

We will be comparing the changes Disney has made to two classic fairy tales, they being Snow White by The Brothers Grimm and The Little Mermaid by Hans Christian Andersen.

## **Snow White**

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (film), released in 1937, is based on the German story Schneewittchen by The Brothers Grimm, which translates to Snow White. The Disney film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was a milestone for Disney. It was the first animated Disney feature film. As the movie goes, Snow White was an object of affection for the Prince but an object of hatred for her evil stepmother, The Queen. Out of envy and spite, The Queen orders Snow White to be killed, but instead Snow White convinces The Huntsman to let her go, and she stumbles through the forest until she finds the seven dwarfs cottage, and upon discovery pleads them to let her stay, in exchange for household work. As the Queen finds out Snow White is still alive, she transforms into an old hag and offers Snow White a poisoned apple, and Snow White falls down dead. It is only after a true love's kiss that Snow White wakes up from her deep slumber and she gets married to the prince who woke her up, and they live happily ever after.

But as the movie was adapted, many changes were made to the storyline so as to appease to the audience. In the original fairy tale, Snow White's mother sits by the window pane on a cold winter time, where she accidentally pricks her finger, and three drops of blood fall onto the snow. She wishes to herself 'How that I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as this frame' (Grimm, Grimm, Zipes & Dezsö, 2014). In the book, when The Huntsman is sent to kill Snow White, he is told to bring back her liver and lungs, whereas in the movie he is told to bring her heart back. Another difference is that in the book, the dwarfs suggests she do household work to stay, whereas in the movie she offers to do so. In the book, the wicked Queen visits Snow White thrice, first with laces which she tied, second with a poisonous comb and third with a half red, half white apple, where only the red side was poisoned. In the movie, on the other hand, she comes only once with a poisoned red apple (presumably to cut short the movie and reduce costs). Another major change is that when Snow White lays in her glass Coffin, in the book she is found by the prince and is taken away to his castle when one of the carriers trip and the poison apple piece comes out and she comes back to life, whereas, in the movie, it is a 'True Love's Kiss' that brings Snow White back to life. Lastly, in the book, when Snow White gets married to The Prince, the wicked stepmother is invited to the feast, but as she arrives and realizes that it is Snow White, they have already prepared for her red hot iron shoes in which she has to dance in till she dies. In the movie, she is seen to be chased by the dwarfs and is struck by lightning at the edge of the cliff and she falls to her doom.

## **The Little Mermaid**

The Little Mermaid (film) released in 1989, is based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *Den Lille Havfrue*, originally written in Danish, which translates to *The Little Mermaid*. In the Disney movie *The Little Mermaid*, the story revolves around a sixteen-year-old mermaid who goes by the name of Ariel, who is discontent with her life at sea and wishes to know more about humans and life on land. As the movie progresses, she sees Prince Eric drowning when she goes to the surface and saves his life by taking him back to the shore, in the process falling in love with him. To go back to him, she makes a deal with the sea witch, Ursula, who gives her human legs for three days in exchange for her voice. If she fails to receive true love's kiss from Prince Eric, she will have to return to Ursula and be her slave forever. As Ariel tries to get close to Eric, she is constantly interrupted by Ursula's henchmen. Trying to foil Ariel's attempts, Ursula transforms into a human named Vanessa and uses Ariel's voice. Enchanted by Vanessa, Eric decides to marry Vanessa, until Scuttle, one of Ariel's animal sidekick, discovers that it is Ursula in disguise. With help of her animal friends, she gets her voice back, but before Prince Eric can kiss Ariel, she turns back into a mermaid. King Triton, realizing that there is no other way to break the contact between Ariel and Ursula, offers to give his crown and trident, and is turned into a polyp. Her hunger for power leads to her downfall and finally, Triton gains his powers back and turns Ariel back to a human, and Eric and Ariel get married and live happily ever after.

But as Disney adapted the story from the fairy tale, we can see the changes Disney made to the storyline. Firstly, in the fairy tale, the little mermaid has no name, so throughout the fairy tale, she is referred to as the Little Mermaid. Also, in the story, the little mermaid is made to suffer every step she takes, and instead of taking her voice away, her tongue is cut off, rendering her mute forever. Also in the original fairy tale, there is a grandmother. The mermaid wishes for an immortal soul like humans, and her grandmother explains how it maybe be possible for her to gain one through marriage to a human. She turns to a sea witch to help her turn human, in exchange for her voice and so, she in mute throughout the book, and is warned that if she does not win the prince's heart and get married to him and instead he marries another woman, she will turn to sea foam and die. As the story progresses, the Prince greatly loves the little mermaid, but he soon falls in love with another woman, the little mermaid painfully sees her dear little prince marry her. As she comes to accept her fate, anticipates for the sun to come out and looking forward to her death by turning to sea foam, her sisters come to the surface with their hair cut off. In their hand is a blade which, can be used to kill the prince and the little mermaid can turn back to a mermaid and live the next three hundred years with her family. But rather than murdering her prince, she kills herself, and instead of dying and turning to sea foam, she becomes a spirit of air, due to her kindness, and in the end has a chance to gain an immortal soul, is she lives the next 300 years doing good deeds. Some other differences we can note is that in the fairy tale, the mermaid has six sisters, whereas, in the movie, she has seven. Also, she does not have any animal sidekicks in the fairy tale.



As we see, the authors like The Brothers Grimm, their aim was “ Wanting to preserve these folktales so they do not get lost or altered, the Brothers Grimm spent a great amount of time collecting and writing down into many volumes” (Grimm’s Fairy Tales, n. d.). whereas Hans Christian Andersen, “ the sources of his stories were mostly Danish folk tales, collected and retold by his immediate predecessors J. M. Thiele, Adam Oehlenschläger, and Bernhard Ingemann. Unlike the collectors, whose aim was to preserve and sometimes to classify and study folktales, Andersen was primarily a writer, and his objective was to create new literary works based on folklore” (OxfordWords blog, n. d.). Whereas Disney’s aim was to make children/family friendly movies for the purpose of entertainment, as they have toned down many of the horrors in the fairy tale origin.

In conclusion, when we change the intent of the story, the whole meaning of the story changes. Thus, the plot of the story plays second fiddle to the intention behind the production of the said story, its intended audience, and the underlying message it will be propagating.

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