

# Breaking the disney spell



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Jack Zipes, in his essay “ Breaking the Disney Spell”, directly addresses the issue of what happens when a story is taken from its original oral form and written down. Zipes discusses in depth what Walt Disney has done to fairy tales and the consequences of Disney’s actions. Zipes addresses many issues, including those of context, society, and alteration of plot. He accuses Walt Disney of attacking “ the literary tradition of the fairy tale” (344). While many scholars disagree with Zipes’ accusations, his essay makes very solid and well-presented points that he promptly backs with fact.

Regardless of what the scholars say, Zipes was right: Oral tradition is important, and Disney’s representations of historical folktales damaged fairy tales as we know them. When Walt Disney began his cartoon and film career in 1927, he might have been unaware of how the American public would rush to purchase his “ original” creations. His first cartoon, a re-creation of Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland that added a comedic spin, began his career in the cartoon industry and eventually spun his company into a billion dollar enterprise (Funding Universe).

As Disney’s popularity grew, he continued to expand his film creations, but generally by copying or “ re-creating” fairy tales or other historical literature. Many Americans believe that Walt Disney was the first person to create fairy tales, and Disney failed to recognize the original creators of the stories that made him so popular: the folk. Historically, fairy tales were told amongst people that historians and folklorists refer to as “ the folk. ” That is, the stories were shared orally, in what is commonly referred to as “ sacred space” (Curry). Fairy tales were not intended to be read alone, in silence.

Rather, they were created to be shared in a group of people, and, while fairy tales were saturated with meaning, that meaning could vary based on the storyteller. Fairy Tales were also often the holders of a warning or admonition that could be adjusted depending on the listener. One mother might have told her daughter one version of “ Cinderella” in order to make a statement about her daughter’s life, whereas another mother might have told a completely different version of the same story. This, Zipes argues, is what made fairy tales unique and important.

He comments, “ A narrator or narrators told tales to bring members of a group or tribe closer together and to provide them with a sense of mission” (332). Fairy tales were told from an older generation to a younger generation. As mentioned previously, they were not shared in private, by oneself, alone with a book or videotape. Zipes comments, “ This privatization violated the communal aspects of the folk tale” (335). The stories were a collective form of communication that occurred in a group setting, in a safe place, in a sacred space. Fairy tales, besides communicating moral and social messages, were a rite of passage.

Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens, both revered folklorists, make a statement about the importance of storytelling and teaching in their book *Living Folklore*. “ Rites of passage mark notable dates or stages in a person’s life. Most rites of passage occur at times of change or transition: birth, puberty, entering adulthood or coming-of-age, marriage, and death, for example” (110). Fairy tales were used in rites of passage as a way to communicate with the younger generation about the changes that take place during puberty, adolescence, and marriage.

Even in the written versions of Fairy Tales produced by the Brothers Grimm, Perrault, and other respected folklorists, scholars are able to grasp and to understand the importance of various elements that are present in the stories that show valuable truth about life adjustments and growing up. Many folklorists, however, consider Disney's version of historical fairy tales to have stripped them of their meaning. Zipes is one of them. Zipes uses the example of Disney's recreation of Puss in Boots to show that Disney altered the story to "use it as a self-figuration that would mark the genre for years to come" (343).

Zipes argues that Disney changes the protagonist of the story from Puss to the "young king." In the original version of the tale, the cat was the hero and the young boy he was friends with played a minor role in the tale. The boy in the original tale was not royalty at all: he was a commoner. Disney changed both the importance of the boy's role in the story, as well as his social status. By adjusting the story, Zipes declares that Disney projected his own self into the story and presented it in a sort of auto-biographical fashion. Disney saw himself as the young king and projected that into the story.

Disney did not see himself as simply an ordinary commoner: he was far above the peasant class, at least in his own mind. While many of Disney's fans and viewers may argue that his recreation of fairy tales made little to no impact on the original meaning, Zipes believes otherwise. "Disney's film is also an attack on the literary tradition of the fairy tale. He robs the literary tale of its voice and changes its form and meaning" (344). Disney not only adjusts the main elements of a story, but he also alters the point of view and the narrator, as we see in Puss in Boots.

Instead of the story being told from Puss' point of view, the "hero" of the story is the young boy. In Disney's other fairy tale recreations, he often adds characters and makes them the hero or savior of the story. Often, instead of being told by a female point of view and being about women, as many fairy tales are historically represented, Disney projects a patriarchal view on the story and makes it obvious to his viewers that a woman's life is meaningless without a man to guide her. Disney's characters all understand the importance of waiting around for their prince to arrive and "save them" from the life that they so torturously endure.

Instead of the bright, intelligent, and witty women that are evidenced in such tales as Italo Calvino's *The False Grandmother* and *Lasair Gheug*, the King of Ireland's *Daughter*, Disney's heroines appear to be lacking not only spine, but brains as well. Many American children have grown up completely unaware that the concept of a prince saving a princess is a distinctly Disney idea. The classic fairy tales often involve feminine strength and an urging of women to be able to outsmart her predators. If a girl is not able to outsmart her attacker, she is simply killed.

This is evidenced quite well in Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood* and the Brothers Grimm tale of *Little Red Cap*. A comparison of the two stories will bring to light the idea that if a young girl is smart enough, she can outwit any predator - even a hungry wolf. The girl in *Little Red Cap* is able to do just that, and escapes with her life. Contrarily, the heroine of *Little Red Riding Hood* is not quite clever enough, and she is "gobbled up" (Perrault 13). The concept of women needing a savior is quite obvious in the Disney version of *Snow White*.

Zipes notes, “ Snow White was his story that he had taken from the Grimm Brothers and changed completely to suit his tastes and beliefs. He cast a spell over this German tale and transformed it into something peculiarly American” (346). Maria Tatar also notes the impact of Disney’s version on the American public as she comments, “ Walt Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs has so eclipsed other versions of the story that it is easy to forget that hundreds of variants have been collected over the past century in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas” (74).

In the oldest versions of Snow White, the heroine of the story does not need to be “ saved” by a prince. The Brothers Grimm depict Snow White coming back to life by her coffin being jarred, which dislodged the apple in her throat (Grimm 89). Similarly, in the Lasair Gheug version of this tale, it is the king’s new wife who saves Snow White by picking the ice out of her forehead and palms (94). Disney, however, shows Snow White as a weak female who must be rescued by her “ prince Charming. ” She is saved, not by accident or by a minor character, but “ when the prince, who has searched far and wife for her, arrives and bestows a kiss on her lips.

His kiss of love is the only antidote to the queen’s poison” (Zipes 348). Disney’s portrayal of princesses or young girls as weak and frail leads Zipes to believe that Disney “ perpetuated a male myth” which is, subconsciously, a celebration of his own destiny and success (348). Disney, although his primary characters are nearly always female, depicts them as weak and needy. It is only the secondary male character and the antagonist female in Disney’s stories who appear to have spines. By keeping his primary female

characters weak, Disney is sending the message that women are helpless without men.

Zipes, in accordance with this idea, notices that not only are the primary females in Disney's stories kept weak, but that the male "heroes" of his tales are overly masculine and are the saviors of the stories. "In this regard," notes Zipes, "the prince can be interpreted as Disney... Snow White cannot be fulfilled until he arrives to kiss her..." (349). Zipes argues that Disney, in his creation of weak females and strong male heroes, is making a statement that he, Disney, is a hero. Disney's re-telling of these fairy tales is not simply adding his own perspective to the issue at hand.

Rather, Disney completely rewrites fairy tales to mean what he wants them to mean. Most historical fairy tales have a common theme and moral in them, regardless of the story teller. From Perrault to the Brothers Grimm, much retelling is similar, with only slight variances. Disney, however, with his addition of "him" to the story, alters the story not only by point of view, but also in its moral and its core message. Some folklorists argue that a recreation and revision of historical folklore is necessary to ensure that the current generations retain their interest in the past.

Many might argue that Disney's retelling of fairy tales has not harmed the historical value of the stories. Benjamin Filene makes this argument in his work *Romancing the Folk*. "... the backward glance can be more than nostalgic — that memory can create American culture anew" (236). While Filene may truly believe that it is important to incite interest in folklore amongst the youth of the current generation, Zipes disagrees. His research leads him to believe that this alteration, whether for personal gain or simply

for popularizing any type of folklore, permanently hinders the message that is inherently present in the original version.

Disney, in his new representations of fairy tales, loses sight of the original messages and completely removed the moral and meaning from the stories. Zipes, in *Breaking the Disney Spell*, provides clear evidence that Disney has violated the sanctity of fairy tales by rewriting them for his own personal pleasure and gain. By projecting himself into the fairy tales, Disney not only removes the moral message of the story, but also replaces the matriarchal values with patriarchal ones. Disney molds women to meet his standards of how women should behave, rather than portraying the strong and clever females that are visible in the original tales.

While fairy tales were altered when they became a written tradition rather than an oral one, most stories still maintained their original moral values. Disney, however, strips the stories even of that in lieu of something “better”: his own pleasure and fame. After Disney, fairy tales will never be the same. Now, society is stuck with his egotistical creations that are beneficial to no one but himself. Instead of the stories being meaningful and a rite of passage, they are reduced to simply a meaningless tale of Disney’s life and goals. Zipes was right: Disney has damaged fairy tales and they will never be quite the same