THE AMERICAN DREAM:

Walt Disney's Fairy Tales

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Fairy tales have long been a source of inspiration for the animated and live action productions of the Walt Disney Studio. Even before the creation of Mickey Mouse in the late 1920s, the Laugh O Gram Studios produced several animated shorts based on fairy tales. In December 1937, after years of work and considerable financial strain, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* had its premiere, to popular and critical acclaim.

Now, nearly eighty years since *Snow White*'s release, the Walt Disney Studio has released fifteen animated feature films based on fairy tales and children's stories, winning numerous Academy Awards for its adaptations. Furthermore, beginning with the hybrid tale *Enchanted* (2007), the studio has started a new tradition in the realm of live action fairy tale movies, based upon the original written stories and the creations of its own fairy tale universe. *Maleficent* (2014) and *Cinderella* (2015) contain references to the original Grimm versions of the stories, as well as character names, songs, and similar locations to their animated Disney counterparts. This has continued with the release of Bill Condon's *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) and several other planned live action features. The development of live action fairy tales has also expanded to the medium of television with the success of series *Once Upon A Time* (2011-), airing on the Disney owned network, ABC Television.

Scholars have had much to say regarding Disney's versions of fairy tales. Jack Zipes, Disney's staunchest critic, claims that Walt Disney "cast a spell" on the fairy tale narrative (1995: 21) and labels him a "twentieth century sanitation man" (1988: 53). Disney stands

accused of infusing traditional tales with saccharine morals, and creating "airy fairy" soap operas unrelated to the great truths of life (Sayers 1965: 606). However, as Davis has argued, the main criticism laid at the door of Disney's fairy tales is their deviation from the so-called "original versions" (Davis 2003: 12): these being the canonical literary texts of the traditional stories the films draw upon, such as the Grimms' 'Snow White' and 'Rapunzel', Perrault's 'Cinderella', Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid' and 'The Snow Queen' and Leprince de Beaumont's 'Beauty and the Beast.'

A particular focus of this school of criticism is the notion that Disney's version of these narratives now dominates society's understanding of fairy tales. As Dorothy Hurley has suggested, "such is the power of visual representation that children tend to believe that Disney's version of the fairy tale is the real story rather than the 'classic'" (2005: 222). The global reach of the Walt Disney Studio gives their productions the potential power to supplant these pre-existing European fairy tale cultures and so to remove traditional tales from their historical and national frame of reference.

While many critics have presented the Disney company's ideology and its productions as problematic (Giroux, 2000) or even "dangerous" (Ross 2004: 63), they are indisputably, enormously popular. Disney's international success since the 1930s, and especially since the Eisner era of the 1990s, is a testament to the studio's excellent quality of productions, to the popularity of the narratives they have selected to adapt into films, and to the Walt Disney Studio's unfailing ability to 'keep a finger on the pulse of America' (Bell, Haas and Sells 1995: 3). In particular, the Walt Disney Company's success has owed much to its capacity to appeal to new forms of nationalism in the United States, and so to contribute to the formation of modern American society. Nicholas Sammond's work is instructive in this regard as he

connects Disney's productions to the formation of a new idea of American childhood. He has argued that "Disney was represented as interceding between an ideal past and an unrealized ideal future, distilling the best impulses of that past into a digestible form that would reappear as the present corrected in that future" (2005: 366).

The present chapter will argue that Walt Disney's fairy tales played a crucial role in the re-imagining of the American Dream in the midst of the Great Depression in the 1930s. This is a central characteristic of Disney's re-telling of the story of "Snow White" in the film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* but is also apparent in every subsequent Disney fairy tale. However, as American society has transformed throughout history, the American Dream of success and happiness has also changed. These changes are echoed in Disney fairy tale narratives. Disney's retellings consistently reflect American cultural identity and the changing nature of American society.

Disney, the Depression and Fairy Tales

In the 1920s, on the world stage, American industry was generally prospering, experiencing an economic boom while the war-torn countries of Europe struggled to cope with increasing demands on their economies. The American myth of success was given material backing; people believed in the Dream (Susman 1984: 179). At this time, the focus of the American Dream was on generating financial wealth and on following an individualist mentality. Anyone could be successful, providing they took charge of their own prosperity.

The Wall Street Crash on October 24 1929 transformed the American Dream overnight. Five thousand banks failed in 1930 and thirteen million Americans were out of work by 1933

(Kennedy 1999: 163). With the onset of financial crisis, the cultural myth of success intrinsic to the American Dream collapsed. The foundational principles of American society were further destabilised by the perceived success of Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union. The people of the United States needed answers to the questions raised about their cultural myth and they looked, among other places, to the movies. Without question, the most popular productions of the 1930s were the animated short subjects of the Walt Disney Studio.

Disney's Silly Symphony *The Three Little Pigs* (1933), released in the midst of Roosevelt's Hundred Days, struck an emotional chord with the populace. It advocated national solidarity, emphatic after Roosevelt's famous appeal to the American people. Furthermore, the short's famous song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf," written by Frank Churchill, became a rallying cry for the battle of the public with the Depression. Disney made light of the threat and emphasized the importance of persistence and community spirit in the struggle against the evils of the Wolf. *The Three Little Pigs* promised success and better times to hardworking and honest Americans, and thus crystallised the connection between Disney animation and the American people's real life fairy tale.

In order to analyse Disney's retellings of fairy tales, it is necessary to unpack the conventional features of these narratives. Steven Swann Jones posits that fairy tales must include "fantasy, a quest, a happy ending and an identification with the unambiguous protagonist" (1995: 12-17). Disney fairy tales combine many of these narrative elements and character traditions but also embody culturally important values inherent in the 1930s. For instance, Disney fairy tales always have a princess, but as Davis has highlighted, there are several Disney princesses that are not borne into royalty (2003), elevating the central importance of the 'rags to riches' storyline in these retellings. While many characteristics of

Disney princesses have changed over time, however, their nature and temperament has not changed. Disney princesses are all as universally kind and good as Snow White, while Disney villains always embody the jealousy and superficiality of the Wicked Queen.

Zipes criticises Disney films for exploiting the common fairy tale theme of the "triumph of the banished and the underdogs" (1995: 37) for the purposes of self-glorification; and yet, this is absolutely central to the idea of the American Dream. In the absence of riches and affluence, it seemed more important than ever that the ordinary man could still become extraordinary through his acts, as opposed to through his wealth. Given the turmoil of the Great Depression, the struggles of the ordinary man became central to American culture. Finally, Disney's 'happily ever after' always comes about through the result of honest dreaming and the desire for change. This was the overriding message of Roosevelt's New Deal and of many Disney productions in the 1930s (see, for example, *The Grasshopper and the Ants*, 1934). The 'happily ever after' in Disney fairy tales is always the result of a dream of relief from the current setting, usually held by the princess, and it often comes about in a way that reflects the cultural fabric of society.

It must also be stated, however, that Disney fairy tales have faced criticism because of their projection of a "pervasive privileging of Whiteness" and "middle class values" (Hurley, 223). According to Schickel (1968), Watts (1997) and Wasko (2001), only certain 'types' of people were given access to the Disney 'happily ever after' and were permitted to have their dreams come true due to Disney's promotion of a conservative value system. However, the fact remains that Disney films "rarely cause controversy" in dominant media outlets when they are released (Davis 2003: 234) because they are populist and mainstream in their nature. They often reflect the times into which they are released and fit neatly into similar genres and

character conventions within Hollywood.

Disney's productions have always been linked to the perpetuation of cultural myth within American society and the American Dream is an integral part of that myth (Sklar 1975: 400). As Campbell and Kean have argued:

> myths are the stories we tell each other as a culture in order to explain
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> complexities and banish contradictions, thus making the world seem
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> simpler and more comfortable to inhabit … they are concerned with the
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> ways in which particular images of the world are conveyed and reinforced
>
> through texts and practices. (1997: 9)

Here, it is argued that as the American Dream has developed, and as the fabric of American society transforms, the Disney fairy tale has also been adapted to reflect these changes.

The Disney Princess

The central figure in the Disney fairy tale is undoubtedly the Disney princess. Rebecca Do Rozario has contended that due to "Disney's popular and global profile … the Disney princess is 'the princess of all princesses'" (2004: 34). Since the release of *Snow White*, Disney's characterisation of the princess has transformed quite significantly, reflecting broader changes in the position of women in society. Scholars have differing views on the character of the Disney princess. Whelan has focused on Disney's creation of the passive princess with Snow White, a figure who involves herself in domestic work throughout the film, which is used as evidence of her servitude and hence her fitness to gain love (2012).

Similarly, it has been argued that Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty are reflective of the post-World War Two cultural context, in which women returned to the domestic sphere after a period of liberation during the conflict (Hollows 2000; Bottigheimer 2009). However, it is perhaps more pertinent to view these princesses within the contexts of the changing nature of the American Dream, and to concentrate on the nature of their characters and their position within the narrative of the Disney fairy tale. Amy M. Davis, for example, has made the case that "Disney films reflected the attitudes of the wider society from which they emerged" (2003: 1). This proves to be the case with all characterisations of the Disney princess.

The best-selling nonfiction book of the 1930s, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie, highlighted the significance of values, behavior, and lifestyles in the culture of the decade. No longer was importance placed on material goods and wealth; success had to come from the inside. Disney's Snow White was the personification of this new spirit. Her greatest weapon against the outside world proves to be the goodness of her character, which is rewarded with her rise from 'rags to riches'. These values are identifiable in every subsequent Disney princess. Cinderella, the original rags to riches princess, is instilled with this goodness and patience. This is paramount in Kenneth Branagh's most recent retelling of this fairy tale, *Cinderella* (2015). Ella (Lily James) is told by her dying Mother (Hayley Atwell) to "have courage and be kind," which becomes her life motto, and is even adopted by Prince Kit (Richard Madden).

With the growth of independent women in movies in the 1990s, the Disney princess' character changes along with America. Pocahontas, Mulan, Jasmine and Belle are all strong women, with a sense of conviction. Susan Jeffords recognises Belle to be "a Disney feminist" (2016: 170) as she rejects Gaston's advances, asking him "What do you know about my

dreams?" Furthermore, such rejection of the need for a handsome suitor is also present in *Pocahontas* (1995). As Davis has argued, "while it is made clear that Pocahontas truly loves John Smith … It is also made clear that she does not need him to be made complete" (2003: 184). She is her own woman, and remains honest and good throughout the movie. Similarly, Tiana's sincerity and work ethic sees the goodness of the Disney princess take on new meaning. Rapunzel, Anna and Elsa are all of a similar disposition. Their characters are sincere and patient and because of this trait, they are all granted their happily ever after. These values show no sign of dissipating with Disney's live action feature *Beauty and the Beast* (2017). Belle (Emma Watson) is gracious, kind and intelligent, continuing to infuse the Disney fairy tale with a sense of morality inherent to the 'original' story.

However, the 'original' fairy tales do not develop the character of the princesses in the same way as the Disney fairy tales, thus the goodness of character comes to hold an integral position in the story, borne out of the importance of character in seeking success in life in the 1930s, the context of Disney's original fairy tale.

The Disney Fairy Tale Villain

The Wicked Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* serves as the blueprint for every subsequent Disney villain. Snow White exemplifies the 1930s values of decency and idealism but the Wicked Queen embodies superficiality, greed, and individual ambition. These were the main components of 1920s ideology that many held responsible for the Wall Street crash. Indeed, the jealousy that drives the story in the Grimm version takes visual shape in the film, through both the commentary of the Magic Mirror and the mirror's green tint when the Queen addresses her own beauty. Again, these values intrinsic to Disney's 1930s tale persist

in Disney fairy tales of the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries. At first, the focus of this jealousy is on the princess' physical appearance and attributes. This is particularly notable with the character of Maleficent in the original *Sleeping Beauty* animated film. Effectively, Maleficent puts an end to the gifts of beauty and song bestowed upon Aurora by the three fairies by cursing her to death on her sixteenth birthday.

In *Tangled*, Mother Gothel kidnaps Rapunzel for the magical qualities of her hair as it allows her to have eternal beauty and youth. However, in recent years, the jealousy of beauty intrinsic to the Disney villain has also extended to a jealousy of the Disney princess' character and position, showcasing a more nuanced version of the villain. We feel sympathy for Maleficent (Angelina Jolie) in the most recent re-telling of 'Sleeping Beauty', entitled *Maleficent* (2014) as she is shown to have lost her wings on the orders of King Stefan. As Davis notes, "whereas strong heroines are a growing trend in Disney animation of this later period, evil women are becoming a dying breed" (2003: 214). While these villainesses are still shown to have these jealous qualities, we are not made to hate them without qualification or a degree of sympathetic understanding.

In Kenneth Branagh's most recent re-telling of *Cinderella*, the Wicked Stepmother (Cate Blanchett) is jealous of Ella's goodness and of her late Mother. Lady Tremaine even wears green more than any other colour, an outward expression of her inner jealousy. Early in the film, she overhears a conversation between Ella and her Father and is suddenly the shunned other woman, never truly able to match up to Cinderella's treasured Mother and we feel sympathy for her situation. Lady Tremaine also shares the story of her life and the loss of her first husband, allowing us to further understand her position. In one poignant scene, Ella asks of the Lady Tremaine; "Why are you so cruel? I don't understand it!" To which the Lady

Tremaine replies, "Because you are young, and innocent, and good … and I …." However, she does not finish her response, appearing aggrieved that her character is somehow irreparable because of the trials and tribulations she has experienced in her life. It seems that while the central trait of jealousy remains integral to the Disney villain, the reasons for this jealousy have become more complex as the Disney fairy tale has transformed alongside American society. Men, circumstance and a loss of innocence also seem to have a role to play in the evolution of the cruel Disney villainess.

The Triumph of the Underdog

The ordinary heroes within the Disney fairy tale are often as important as the princess herself. Grumpy, Doc, Sleepy, Sneezy, Dopey, Bashful, and Happy are now all indelibly associated with the Snow White story. Part of the reasoning behind Disney's decision to characterize the dwarfs was largely the success of *The Three Little Pigs*. Each of the little pigs involved in the plot to take down the Big Bad Wolf had different characteristics, all of them relatable to ordinary citizens. The Depression created a new 'common' American man through the shared experience of poverty and unemployment. All men of society, of all backgrounds and temperaments, had to work together to bring about a new prosperity in America. This emphasis on collective action is at the heart of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and was the cornerstone of one of Roosevelt's biggest projects in the New Deal: the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Snow White's dwarfs exemplify the community spirit roused by Roosevelt's New Deal. Anyone could be successful in life, as long as they worked together. Walt Disney also tapped into the social culture of the 1930s by elevating the humble dwarfs to the position of heroes in the story.

The triumph of the underdog has always been central to American cultural identity. Carolyn Kitch has drawn attention to the centrality of this narrative to national myth. The success of the little hero seems to have an intrinsic link to the resilience of American spirit (2002). This is seen in many elements of popular culture, but is primarily in evidence in film and on television. Booker highlights the subscription of American 'blue collar' popular culture' to the basic formula of the glorification of the underdog "who triumphs against the odds because of his or her innate merit" (2012: 282).

There are many little heroes in the Disney fairy tale. In the animated version of *Cinderella*, the mice are ultimately responsible for freeing Cinderella from her tower so she can try on the glass slipper. Sebastian and Flounder in *The Little Mermaid* play a significant role in trying to help Ariel secure her kiss from Prince Eric and in the final battle against the Sea Witch, Ursula. Most recently, in *Frozen* and *Tangled*, the underdog even *becomes* the prince. The thief Flynn Ryder and the ice seller Kristoff both win the hearts of the princesses, showing that the underdog has a crucial role to play in the formation of the Disney 'happily ever after.'

At the beginning of each of these narratives, Kristoff and Flynn chase money and superficial possessions indicative of 1920s ideology. Miriam Meissner has underscored the transformations in narratives following the crash of 2008, emphasising the implicit critique of the city and its values in these films, and their advocacy of the importance of stability and community (2017). At the end of these adaptations of traditional stories, it is revealed that each of these characters wants stability, financial security and a sense of belonging.

The American Dream and Happily Ever After

Lastly, it is pertinent to discuss the dream of a 'happily ever after' inherent in many Disney fairy tales. Steven Swann Jones has emphasised that in all fairy tales, "this happy ending is such a basic and important aspect of the genre, it may be regarded as a definitional feature" (1995: 17). Disney's fairy tales weave the desire for change into their narrative. This desire for relief from the current setting was very much present in the society in which *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was made. As the American Dream has developed through time, however, the essence of the Disney dream has also changed. This is particularly evident with the changing position of the Disney princess.

Developing from post-feminist narratives in the 1990s, the ultimate goal in the Disney princess' journey shifts from finding "any prince to the right prince" (Stover 2013: 4). Emphasis is drawn to the agency of the princess in creating her *own* destiny. While originally held captive by the Beast, Belle turns him "into a 'new' man, one who is sensitive, caring and loving" (Giroux 2000: 100) and returns to the Castle to save his life. Jasmine rejects the suitors proposed by her Father and *chooses* Aladdin. Pocahontas and Mulan both favour their 'career' and their family calling over their desire for a husband (Davis 2003). In the case of *Frozen*, *Brave, Tangled,* and the latest Disney princess release, *Moana* (2017), the princess' 'happily ever after' doesn't contain a prince at all. Princess Merida, Elsa in *Frozen* and the chief's daughter, Moana, have no romance in their personal narratives, and neither Rapunzel's Flynn nor Anna's Kristoff are borne of royalty.

Disney princesses are breaking out of their previous typeset roles and the early Disney dream is now being mocked and referenced within the framework of the Disney films themselves. This began with the live action and animated feature film, *Enchanted* (2007), in which every single tenet of the traditional Disney fairy tale is overturned and updated. The Prince (James

Marsden) is portrayed as useless and the Princess, Giselle, (Amy Adams) wants to date her prince before marrying him. Tasker argues that this is a paradoxical narrative for Disney as it "registers a discomfort with the reproduction of passive models of feminine acquiescence for audiences of girls and a need to reconcile that discomfort with the requisite happy ending in which the couple are united" (2011: 69). Similarly, Cristina Bacchilega has drawn attention to the way in which the parody of the traditional fairy tale in *Enchanted* expresses "a disavowal of belief in fairy tale fantasies" and in doing so opens "up the space for rehearsing those very fantasies" (2013, 118).

While one could argue that the ironic 'performance' of the fairy tale in *Enchanted* significantly reduces its feminist impact, this film should be recognised as part of a growing trend of independence for the Disney princess and a change in the nature of her 'happily ever after.' In the 2009 retelling of *The Princess and the Frog*, Princess Tiana rejects the notion of wishing upon a star and chooses instead to work hard and save to open up her restaurant. The princess figure is parodied through the character of Charlotte, whose obsession with her appearance and finding romance are pitted against Tiana's sensibilities. The Disney princess and her fairy tale were given a new, modernised framework. Set against the backdrop of the inauguration of President Obama, it is difficult to deny the contextual importance of this Disney fairy tale. As Lester has underlined, "the reality of the first African American president … made the moment of Disney's first African American princess even more boldly pronounced" (2010: 298).

The Disney 'happily ever after' continues to be treated with irony within the narrative of *Frozen*, as Anna's song, 'Love is an Open Door' with Prince Hans contains many visual references to previous Disney fairy tale films, including *Peter Pan*, *Aladdin*, and *Cinderella*.

The change in narrative also becomes apparent in an exchange between Kristoff and Anna when Kristoff criticises Anna for getting engaged to Prince Hans after just one day, exposing the modern reality of the Disney 'happily ever after.' The Disney fairy tale is self-consciously referenced and modernised in *Frozen* in other ways. For example, the traditional notion of romantic 'true love' in Disney fairy tales is changed, as Anna saves her sister's life by sacrificing her own, challenging the sexist notion that true love's kiss must save the day; instead, acts of trust, selfless love and family are proposed as alternatives (Wilde 2014: 147).

It also needs to be considered that as the fabric of American society is changing, so too is the Disney fairy tale and the Disney dream. This is particularly important for the representations of the gay community in Disney films. Sean Griffin has argued that following capitalist pressures, the company has been forced to "recognise a gay market for its products, and not a gay agenda" (xviii). Carrie Cokeley has similarly contended that Disney animation promotes heterosexual imagery throughout its narratives (2005). However, in some more recent animated and live action productions there is evidence of a shifting attitude towards previously marginalised groups. This is particularly evident with Disney's retelling of *Beauty and the Beast.* The character of Lefou (Josh Gad) was openly recognised as gay in press reviews of the film (Furness 2017 and Lodge 2017). Gad portrays Lefou as desiring his companion, Gaston (Luke Evans), and importantly, sees him find happiness in the closing moments of the film, dancing at Belle and the Beast's wedding with another man.

Conclusion

Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was borne out of Depression culture in the 1930s, where the transformative nature of Roosevelt's New Deal had a substantial impact on

American ideology. The former focus on individualism in the 1920s was replaced with a felt need for communitarian action and emphasis on the value of character over material wealth. These substantial cultural shifts were reflected in Disney's first fairy tale film and are shaped by distinctive developments in American history. However, Disney fairy tales are proving more relevant than ever to the changing socio-cultural landscape of the American Dream. The 'Cinderella' story of the rise from 'rags to riches', the importance of the goodness of one's character, the jealousy of the villain, the triumph of the underdog and the hope for a happy ending still infuse Disney fairy tales today. Indeed, the underdog has become more important than ever, and in some cases has been elevated to the role of prince. In many recent Disney fairy tales, moreover, the princess is no longer required to have a husband by the end of the story. Finally, Disney fairy tales are also beginning to recognise the gay community, reflecting substantial changes within American society, including legalisation for gay marriage in the United States in 2015.

As the socio-cultural conditions of American society have transformed, the essence of the American Dream has changed, and there has been a subsequent shift in Disney fairy tale narratives. This development has become more visible in the last few years, as Disney remakes its animated fairy tale productions as live action features, prompting a direct comparison between the 'old' and the 'new'. As a result, Disney fairy tales have become more 'real' than ever before, exposing their inherent idealism to the harsh conditions of everyday life. To accommodate for this elaborate shift in American cultural identity, Disney's fairy tale characters are now more nuanced and emotionally complex, and their 'happily ever afters' have been modified and made more realistic. This underlines the centrality of the Disney fairy tale to the negotiation and mediatisation of the American Dream.

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