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Walt Disney's Interpretation of Children's Literature

Walt Disney's great entertainment films based upon children's literature have gained him more recognition than any of his other endeavors. His use of substantial literary classics has been praised by some, loathed by others, but remembered by all. The films which first made him a household name—*Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Pinocchio*, and *Bambi*—are the very films most sharply criticized by scholars in children's literature. All four, typical Disney productions, are animated feature films first designed to entertain an American audience which would include children and adults. None was designed to reflect the literary elements of theme, characterization, and writing style found in the original books. What Walt Disney wanted when he bought the rights to a children's classic was the basic setting and plot.

Disney's position in the field of the entertainment film based upon children's literature is unique in many ways. He produced the most film adaptations of children's classics. Since all of these feature-length films were first designed to be shown in movie theaters and were not planned around educational or literary objectives, they represented a calculated look at children's stories. Disney sought the memorable drama, the action and the villainy long remembered by the reader after finishing the original of a well known book. He planned his film versions around satisfying emotional experiences that would remain with the viewer. Disney never produced films that demanded much intellectually of the audience. Seldom did he reflect the book's theme or original characters with accuracy. And while his settings depended upon the author, the scene rarely maintained its original cultural and geographic heritage. It was this manipulation of children's stories that has continuously raised the ire of professionals in the field of children's literature. Perhaps the best protest within the ranks of children's librarians and educators is that of former librarian and teacher Frances Clarke Sayers, who said:

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I find almost everything objectionable. . . . There is a curious distortion . . . in Disney's folklore. He does strange things. He sweetens a folk tale. Everything becomes very lovable. In Cinderella for example, the birds are too sweet, and a great deal of attention is paid to the relationship of Cinderella to the birds and the mice. You realize this technique gives animation a chance to operate, but it destroys the proportion and purpose of the story, the conflict and its resolution. Folk tales are so marvelous in structure and symbolism that this distortion of the elements is particularly bad. (1965, p. 603)

Disney never formally responded to criticism leveled from the ranks of educators and librarians. Perhaps this is because he knew he had captured the hearts of his intended audience and he didn't intend to become involved in an intellectual argument that might point out some of the weaknesses of his productions. Since most of the sharp criticism was published in professional journals there is a possibility that he never read it. In any event, the criticism never reached the ears of his intended audience, middle Americans who reveled in these new feature-length "family films" based upon a well known title in children's literature which they probably had never read. That audience's continued support of Disney has never diminished.

In 1977 eighty-one Purdue University junior and senior elementary education students were polled concerning their favorite film experience within the category of "family fare." All were told they could name any type of film, whether it be educational, animated, or musical. Forty-eight named a Disney full-length film as their favorite, twenty students said they had no favorite movie suitable for children, and the remaining thirteen voted for either an adult musical or a live-action adaptation of a children's book. Thirty-two of the forty-eight students who voted for Disney voted for an animated feature based on children's literature; three voted for any production by Disney. The survey was repeated the next semester, and the results were similar. Students voted for a Disney film four to one, and preferred animated films three to one.

Disney advocates come from both sexes. Young men often confess that as children they went to and enjoyed his animated fantasies. Most admit that they want their children exposed to Disney renditions of the classics. Young women can recall scenes of terror and scenes of romance from the early animation. When asked, they can describe each heroine in minute detail. Yet, they rarely remember the conversations of these characters. All the lovely young Disney ladies floated by in a series of electric adventures. Many young people of both sexes say that they still enjoy watching a full-length feature film by Disney more than reading the story in book form.

One of Disney's greatest achievements in the realm of film was to replace the reader's desire to pursue a book's theme through the viewing pleasure of light-hearted American entertainment. Instead of recreating the book, he created an entirely different medium and used a familiar title to give a comfortable feeling of recognition to the audience. When criticizing this Disney trait Sayers said:

Disney takes a great masterpiece and telescopes it. He reduces it to ridiculous lengths, and in order to do this he has to make everything very obvious. It all happens very quickly and is expressed in very ordinary language. There is nothing to make the child think or feel or imagine. (1965, p. 604)

Perhaps to adult critics versed in children's literature Disney lacked scholarship. But to the average American youngster his films reflected real entertainment and the stuff that dreams are made of. It is doubtful that Walt Disney sought more. Hollister wrote about Disney:

The Disney library contains all the durable children's stories ever told. It also contains five hundred joke books and bound files of the notable humorous publications. It contains a battery of steel filing cabinets which hold a million and a half typed and classified jokes, each legally ascribed to the source from which it was set down. There are 124 classifications of such jokes, and each has from five to twenty sub-classifications . . . Along one wall is a steel file of sixteen solid cabinets of cartoon jokes. (1940, p. 697)

Disney looked for a laugh and wrote into classical literature humorous characters designed to steal the hearts of their audiences with their human foibles (though they were usually depicted as personified animals) and their slapstick humor. Disney changed literature from the classical to the mainstream folk. He could not maintain the tempo of highbrow literature in animation and so he envisioned a grass roots story based upon classical elements. Disney's studio library reflected his own taste. Nowhere in the critical writings concerning his productions, both pro and con, is he discussed as an intellectual person whose reading stimulated his films. He abandoned formal schooling before completing high school and, although he received numerous honorary degrees for his achievements, he never sought a degree from a university. It is questionable that such a degree would have been within the arts had he sought one. His interest was not in scholarship but in the entertainment and the attitudes of the typical American.

It is interesting that Disney seldom used U.S. books as background for his feature-length films. Later productions, including *Robin Hood*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Winnie-the-Pooh*, are based upon European classical literature. All the animated films most remembered by college students were based upon European literature. Yet Disney's versions were strangely Americanized and his packaging was very American.

Disney used total merchandising techniques for the family fare. He created a film production which led the reader not to the classic, but to the Disney adaptation. Children introduced to Disney's films felt most comfortable with the Disney books. When commenting upon Disney's ability to create a new story only identified in the Disney version *Newsweek* once wrote:

Walt Disney's career may be founded on elfin fantasy and hybrid corn, but it thrives on the hardest sell in Hollywood: The "total merchandising" concept. "Once a decision is made to make a picture, the marketing starts," says soft-spoken Roy Disney, Walt's brother and financial mentor. "All the moves are geared to publicizing the final product, and making money while you do it." (1962, p. 50)

Usually the sheet music, records, children's toys and Disney book versions of any classic were available before the film was released. Disney was thus assured that the audience would be familiar with the main characters long before the film could be shown. Children raised on Disney merchandise were ready for the film, a film which would become an American classic.

In a critical article concerning Disney, Sneed wrote:

It would be going fanatically far to blame Disney and his hulking studio for everything soft and sleazy in our culture. Yet one can trace his influence back and forth through movies, comic strips, even decor. . . . [F]or a long time, the Disney-like inanities ruled the roost and dictated what cartoons were supposed to be like—brainless and smooth and manic. (1967, pp. 26-27)

Disney's popularity does not rest with his literary knowledge. He was not impressed with a book's intricate development of a universal theme. He was simply concerned with finding a good story that could be simplified and Americanized for his audience. In fact, Disney never sought to promote literature in the book format. He was intent upon selling American audiences a new kind of entertainment medium: the feature-length film which reflected middle American values. In order to obtain his goal he used European stories (thereby indirectly suggesting that American social values and prejudices were universal), but he changed the story to contain a simple, rosy plot that depended upon fast action, music, and emotional reactions. In his versions, the conflict would be simplified into no more than five pages of dialogue, original upbeat songs, and the cute antics of minor characters. Thus, he could create a highly successful animated film that would appeal to the masses without directly offending the minorities which he depicted in stereotyped caricatures.

As a film producer Walt Disney was a genius. He was one of the first to make a sound film (*Steamboat Willey*, 1928), the first to create a full-length animated film (*Snow White*, 1937), and the first to use stereophonic sound (*Fantasia*, 1939). But his ethnic understanding and literary values were strongly lacking. He used black voices for monkeys and apes (*The Jungle Book*), depicted Italians as aggressive, mindless people who spoke in broken English and were strongly influenced by their emotions (*The Lady and the Tramp* and *Pinocchio*), and implied that higher education was inhabited by an intellectually inferior group of people who could not handle their day-to-day existence (*The Absent-Minded Professor*). In his book, *The Disney Version*, Schickel commented:

Perhaps if he had had a little less technological imagination—and a great deal less business acumen—to distract him, he might have found a way to be faithful not to the letter of his material, but be faithful instead to its true spirit, its animating spirit. Unfortunately, he lacked the tools, intellectual and artistic, he needed for this task. He could make something his own, alright, but that process nearly always robbed the work at hand of its soul if you will. In its place he put jokes and songs and fright effects, but he always seemed to diminish what he touched. He always came as a conqueror . . . hoping to do good but equipped only with know-how instead of sympathy and respect for alien traditions. (1968, p. 227)

Disney used children's literature as a means to subtly support his own image of middle America's strengths and of U.S. societal weaknesses. He made stories that reflected his own ideology, an ideology that was based upon innate prejudices and practical experiences. Born into a lower middle class family, Walt learned the importance of hard work at an early age, but he was never truly introduced to the merits of good literature. He understood the midwestern use of an indirect social slur, of the ethnic joke, but he was never schooled in the need for diversity within society. Disney believed in and supported the concept of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant American society that thrived because of its work ethic and its honest

principles. His productions reinforced mainstream values. His skillful use of humor and music made his films lighthearted and therefore acceptable to minorities. His use of personified animals and of outlandish behavior in many of the main characters within any one film kept the typical audience laughing. Furthermore, his use of a quick pace and of several scenes so engrossed the audience that they had little time to consciously catch the social slur or the ethnic slight found within the script. Yet, a close look at the animated productions most remembered by American audiences reveals those American qualities Disney promoted—and criticized—through his films.

Snow White

Snow White was Disney's first real attempt to reproduce classical children's literature. Actually, Disney chose to begin with a story whose roots were in oral adult folklore. The tale as first collected by the German brothers Grimm was intended for adult entertainment long before the printed page was invented. As such, it contained the morals of the common folk, and it stressed two main themes found in most early folklore: that the good humble person shall be rewarded and that the wicked shall be punished. The original tale is much more graphically violent than early children's literature. The characters are actively involved in a drama, but they are discussed with such lack of development that their emotional appeal is low. They can be offensive and frightening or beautiful and kind, but they are never more than shadows of human beings. This is the episodic adventure of a young princess faced with a beautiful arrogant woman who is obsessed by jealousy of the young stepdaughter's beauty and youth. It contains all the stylistic devices of oral literature. The princess hides with seven nameless dwarfs, the queen directly tries to kill the princess three times, the father is ineffective, the princess is rewarded for her goodness by being saved and marrying a prince, and the wicked queen is punished with death. The themes gain impact not from the characterizations, but from the culminating action. It is a brutally satisfying story that stresses early social justice over human emotions. In the original story, Snow White is a young girl whose survival depends upon her innocence and her youthful beauty. She is neither clever nor independent. But she is trusting and obedient, two characteristics that both hinder her and help her. Once the hunter has gone, the original story relates:

Now the poor child was completely alone in the great forest. She was frightened and did not know what to do. She began to run, and stumbled into sharp stones and into thorns. Wild animals sprang past her, but did her no harm. She ran as long as her legs could carry her until just before evening she saw a little house and went inside to rest. In the house, everything was small, but neat and clean. (Grimm 1974, unpagged)

Disney pictured an Americanized story of a princess who more closely resembles a winner of the Miss America contest. His princess is sweet, has a talent (singing), works hard, and wants more than anything to marry and settle down. She is the earth mother whose love of animals and general kindhearted nature fills the queen with rage. The queen is not torn by her own oncoming old age and loss of beauty, but is shown to be a mean creature who can't stand Snow White because of

her cheerfulness. Disney is so intent upon building a melodramatic scene that he changes the entire family relationship. The original story never tells the listeners anything about Snow White's father once he remarries. Disney changed this and pictured the father as a sympathetic American industrialist when he wrote:

The queen paid small attention to the King himself. So he kept on working harder and harder at being a King, and he worked so hard he died. (*Good Housekeeping* 1937, p. 35)

But the scene stealers in Disney's version are the seven dwarfs who are no longer clean, sensible fellows who protect a sweet innocent child, but are children themselves in desperate need of a mother. And Snow White is very much a confident young woman capable of handling these unruly little men. Instead of answering "Oh yes, with all my heart!" to their demands that she cook and clean if she is to remain, Disney's princess surveys the mess and like any good, clean housewife exclaims:

"Seven children must live here . . . And from the looks of things, seven very neglected children. Why, I never saw so much dust! And my, how untidy! . . . Tsk! Tsk! Tsk!" said Snow White. "You'd think their mother—" She stopped, and a tear came into her eye. "Oh, maybe they have no mother"! . . . Suddenly she brightened. "I know! I'll clean the house and surprise them. Maybe then they will let me stay. Perhaps I'm just what these children need!" (*Good Housekeeping* 1937, p. 222)

Disney understood his medium, and knew that he had to change the original so that it would last almost two hours instead of the short twenty minutes it originally took to tell. So he beefed up the story with cute scenes that included animals, dwarfs, and music. He also realized that the original story's finale was too severe for the screen. In the original the tale ends:

Snow White was happy to go with him. Their wedding was arranged with great splendor and magnificence and, among others, Snow White's evil stepmother was invited to the festivities. After she dressed herself in beautiful clothes, she stood before her mirror and said,

Mirror, mirror on the wall
Who is most beautiful in
the land?

The mirror answered,

Lady Queen, you are the
most beautiful here,
But the young Queen is a
thousand times more
beautiful than you. . . .

[S]he could not rest; she had to see the young Queen. As soon as she arrived, she recognized Snow White and stood there—full of anguish and terror—and could not move. But iron slippers had already been placed on a coal fire and were brought in with tongs and placed before her. She had to step into the red hot shoes and dance until she fell down dead. (Grimm 1974, unpagged)

American audiences would not be entertained by such a brutal scene. The philosophy of "an eye for an eye" is not an acceptable one to mainstream Americans. So, Disney's queen is sent to her death through an accident during a rain storm. At this point the movie loses its melodramatic qualities and becomes the

U.S. story of boy meets girl, boy wins girl, boy marries girl, and they live happily ever after.

Cinderella

Disney used this same formula when creating his second fairy tale fantasy, *Cinderella*. This time he used one of Charles Perrault's tales taken from the French court. A much more elegant tale, it lacked the violence found in Grimm. In fact, this tale was so nonviolent that Disney felt obligated to change the story so that the villains could truly be despised, and the heroine could be considered even more beautiful and charming than any others in the story. Concerning the two stepsisters the original tale explains:

It happened that the King's son gave a ball, and he invited all persons of high degree. The two young ladies were invited amongst others, for they cut a considerable figure in the country. (Perrault 1961, p. 60)

Disney's stepsisters could never have cut a fine figure anywhere. They are purposely grotesque to heighten the drama. They are lazy, nasty creatures whose main purpose in life seems to be to argue among themselves. While they are not as frightening as the wicked queen in *Snow White*, they are equally repulsive. The cuteness and charm found within Disney's story is depicted through Cinderella's little mice friends who talk to her. Yet these very characters solidify Disney's use of humorous portrayals concerning physical or mental handicaps. Disney's subtle use of the social slur is so mild it seems at first glance to be but a wholesome comic picture of human deficiencies. But at second glance Disney's poke at the retarded (Dumbo in *Snow White*) and the fat person with a speech impediment (Gus in *Cinderella*) is very American. In these characterizations he has used the ploys so popular to U.S. audiences who had earlier viewed the slapstick humor of the overdramatized silent films. The handicaps of both characters are used to create comic relief in order to keep these tales from becoming too somber. Both princesses survey their handicapped friends' antics much like one would the activities of a frisky puppy who has not been trained to control his natural instincts: they are cute, but they need paternalistic guidance if they are to exist in society.

Pinocchio

There are few youngsters today who are familiar with the original *Pinocchio* or *Bambi*. These two books are now a part of American popular culture as designed by Disney. When commenting about Disney's *Pinocchio* Sayers said:

[T]here's an illustration of Pinocchio smoking the pipe and Lampwick playing at billiards. The description of Lampwick is supposed to be childlike, and these are the games that they play: billiards and smoking pipes. . . . I think the truth is that Walt Disney has never addressed himself to children once in his life—never. This material is made to reach an adult audience. (1965, p. 607)

Mrs. Sayers perception of Disney's audience is right. The films created for family audiences were designed to entertain adults and children alike while not offending parents. Although *Pinocchio* is an excellent children's classic concerning

a wooden puppet's gradual growth into a sympathetic youngster, many of the scenes in the original books might offend. The Italian author Carlo Lorenzini created his story in the late 1800s; its lively prose depicts a wild cast of characters tied together in an absurd drama. Disney chose to change the story and to focus the drama on a naughty but never malicious puppet and his conscience, Jiminy Cricket. Just after Pinocchio is given life by the Blue Fairy in Disney's version Jiminy Cricket says "Remember what she told you—always let your conscience be your guide!" to which Pinocchio replies (with due respect) "yes, sir, I will!" (*Good Housekeeping* 1939, p. 68). In the original story, Pinocchio's first encounter with the cricket ends after the puppet becomes angry at this wise old philosopher's advice to study and be good. Finally he exclaims:

"Careful, ugly Cricket! If you make me angry, you'll be sorry!"

"Poor Pinocchio, I am sorry for you."

"Why?"

"Because you are a Marionette and, what is much worse, you have a wooden head."

At these last words, Pinocchio jumped up in a fury, took a hammer from the bench, and threw it with all his strength at the talking Cricket. Perhaps he did not think he would strike it. But sad to relate, my dear children, he did hit the cricket, straight on its head. With a last weak "Cri-cri-cri-" the poor cricket fell from the wall, dead! (Colodi 1939, pp. 16-17)

Throughout the book Pinocchio's behavior does not improve until after he is thrown into the sea with a stone around his neck. He is at once one of the most obnoxious and entertaining heroes within children's literature. He would be a totally unsympathetic character if it were not for Lorenzini's crisp writing style which abounds with quick scenes and wit.

Disney could never have recaptured Lorenzini's style with his, and he probably knew it from the start. Without the clever narrative the activity within the book becomes unbelievable. Furthermore, nothing in the original plot is really cute or lovable. American parents have never wholeheartedly accepted fresh kids; as the active, doing hero in an animated film, the original Pinocchio would have provoked them to fury. Realizing this, Disney refocused the plot line, changed the personalities and responsibilities of the main characters, and reorganized the theme to be one of needing to live clean and not to smoke or gamble in order to grow up and get ahead. Disney's Pinocchio is a sweet personality who strives to be good. His cricket is not smashed, but is listened to and made a hero. This fare would be much more acceptable to U.S. families. Lorenzini's subtheme of attending school to learn and to become someone is played down. Disney's episodic story pleased the popular press and the American family. Ferguson in his review for *The New Republic* wrote:

If little has been said of the story, it may be because all these excitements make up for very little story at all: it's a string of adventures in very adventuresome places, and surely the last part with the charging bull whale is as fast action as your digestion will allow. . . . We get around the problem of no old word for a new thing by saying, It's a Disney. (1940, p. 346)

Bambi

The most interesting thing about *Bambi* was Disney's miscalculation of the average

person when he created the film. Felix Salten's book is bounding with gentle, realistic conversations among the animals. While the film contains memorable characters, the gentle nature of the book is traded for the humorous. Thus, Salten's Hare is changed from a quiet, knowledgeable forest elder to Thumper, a noisy, lovable rabbit who steals every scene when he appears. One reviewer wrote:

Newcomer Thumper carries most of Bambi's comedy. Just a normal growing bunny, he won't eat his greens, and adds sly innuendoes to the maxims his mother makes him recite. As court jester to Bambi, who is prince and must maintain a reasonable reserve, he is very funny. (*Time* 1942, p. 78)

Disney recreated Salten's characters and changed the setting from the German Black Forest to Maine, but he left Salten's anti-hunting message intact. Bambi's real enemy is shown to be man, the hunter, the invader of the forest. When Raymond J. Brown, editor of *Outdoor Life*, protested that *Bambi* should be appended with a foreword acknowledging the sportman's contribution to wildlife, Disney failed to respond. As a result, the editor branded the film "the worst insult ever offered to American sportsmen and conservationists" (*Newsweek* 1942, p. 70). Disney never directly responded concerning his film's message; perhaps it did not affect him directly. Nevertheless, he never again presented such a strong theme concerning ecology in his major films. Instead, he maintained his strong technological skills in family film, both animated and live action. Sayers said:

What I am eager for people to do is to realize that in his own medium Walt Disney has made a great contribution to the humor of the world. What I object to is his treatment of traditional literature. . . . In the early days and in certain other films, Disney is a master in his own field. I just would like to have him stay in that field and not attempt to impose his particular gifts on the literature and the arts of children. (1965, pp. 610-611)

What Sayers is discussing is the impact Disney has had upon written literature. Yet, what she and all other critics who complain of Disney's restructuring of children's classics fail to acknowledge is that Walt Disney perceived American society from a very different viewpoint. Disney began creating his middle American films during a period of decline in reading. By the time he was recognized as a leader in children's productions school language arts programs had refocused their goals from interest in the literary qualities in literature to reading skills as reflected in the "Dick and Jane" primers. Society was attuned to middle class values; it was less interested in classics than in reading skills. Furthermore, no other major film producer had turned to children's literature in the field of entertainment. Disney's feature-length animated films were singular for their production, distribution, and popularity. In his book *The Disney Films* Marten commented:

It is wrong for critics to chide Disney for not living up to his potential, for it was his potential as *they* saw it. Disney was satisfied with his films because they lived up to his visions of them, and when released to theatres, his judgement was echoed by countless millions who delighted in what he gave them. (1973, p. 15)

Despite what adult literary critics may think about Disney and his values, he was shrewd enough to understand modern U.S. families and their visual and literary interest. He created episodic films based on the plots of classical literature, and

replaced the intellectual theme with a satisfying emotional experience. His films have dominated in the field of family film entertainment because of their technical excellence and their optimistic message. When evaluating Disney, Bright wrote:

I think the man's unique success can be understood only by reference to his personal non-uniqueness. Of all the activists of public diversion, Uncle Walt was the most precisely in the American midstream—in task and morality, attitudes and opinions, prides and prejudices. (1967, p. 303)

Disney is a part of children's literature that must be recognized. His technology, his use of children's classics, his popularity and his lasting effect upon American culture are significant. He was capable not only of establishing trends in the area of family entertainment, but of misusing classical literature to his (and perhaps U.S. cultural) preferences. Though Walt Disney is dead, his spirit lives on in the hearts of many Americans. Their reading and viewing attitudes have often been shaped by his splendid animation and his use of stereotypic characters. Disney did more about the reading interests of children during the last half of the twentieth century than any other person. What American has not seen at least one Disney film of a particular classic and remembered it vividly henceforth?

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