To what extent have Disney’s Fairy Tale adaptations affected people’s knowledge of their origins?

Abstract –

Discussing Disney’s Fairy Tale adaptations, this essay aims to see whether the original authors have been obscured through the means in which the tales have been adapted and to what extent, whilst also looking into the term Disneyfication as a possible factor to the obscurity.

Using both contemporary and modern examples of adaptations, a survey was conducted and statistics compiled in the aim to see the public’s awareness of the adaptations origins and to what extent the authors have been obscured.

All of the above compiled in this essay, with literary research, was discussed in order to create a solid argument to answer the question of this paper.

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**Introduction:**

The focus of the discussion in this essay will be on how fairy tale adaptations have affected people’s knowledge and awareness of the origins, specifically looking into the company Disney.

Disney is a prominent name in both industry and popular culture, and as a result of this; it is possible to state that fairy tales are associated with Disney.

Attempting to examine how Disney have re-imagined the works of Hans Christian Andersen, The Grimm Brothers and Charles Perrault will allow comparison between older and more contemporary examples of work in order to evaluate the extent of how an individual’s knowledge of the tales origins have been affected.

According to Robert Stam, an adaptation “is the artistic and technical mode employed by the filmmakers to change and re-create a known or popular text” (Stam, 2000). This can also be described as changing one filmic material from one genre to another (Yang, 2011).

Disney was not the first to work with fairy tales, and with the focus on this and the above statements in mind, the term ‘Disneyfication’ will be discussed in relation to how adaptations have been implemented and whether or not the original works have been obscured.

Another question to be addressed will be whether or not re-imagined fairy tales are more familiar to the general public than earlier versions.

A survey aimed at different age groups was undertaken in an attempt to answer the above question. This, in conjunction with literary research, will allow appropriate investigation and review.

**Chapter 1: Adaptation and Disneyfication**

The term Disneyfication is prominent, and appears in many publications. One such publication by Alan Byrman discusses the stronghold that Disney holds over the entertainment industry and its possible impact. (Bryman, 2004)

Although the above publication discusses the effect that Disneyfication has on society in general, the term can also be applicable to Disney’s influence on fairy tales.

According to Karen Klugman, Disneyfication is “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)

Jack Zipes, an author against Disney and it’s adaptations of the classic fairy tales, expresses that the names of formerly renowned authors such as Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen and The Grimm Brothers have been ‘obfuscated’. (Zipes, 1994, p.10)
With Disney’s popularity and leading position over the industry it could be said that Disney have instilled a certain image of what a fairy tale is, one that arguably still holds today.

“The art of adaptation and appropriation has a potent influence and shaping effect in its own right...No appropriation can be achieved without impacting upon and altering in some way the text which inspired the adaption. So influential, indeed, have some appropriations become that in many instances they now define our first experiences or encounters with their precursor work of art.” (Sanders, 2007)

Thus, it is fair to say that Disney were not the first to adapt stories and have simply done what many others have before them.

When comparing Disney’s adaptations to the originals, it is obvious that a lot of changes are made throughout. However, it can be argued that the obscurity of the original tales can be down to people’s ignorance on the subject and not solely as a result of Disney’s renditions.

It could be suggested that such drastic changes affect the perception of the stories and the Disney versions are doing the original tales injustice. (Sayers, 1965)

Another possible factor that could influence the findings of this essay is the fact that variations in sources play a big part in people’s awareness of fairy tales. It could be argued that only being exposed to the Disney version of the adapted source would make knowledge limited to what was seen, and it would depend on how true the adaptations kept to the original works which would determine the extent of the person’s knowledge.

On the contrary, it could also be argued that the Disney adaptations can ignite a new interest in the original sources used. The adaptations could serve to put lesser known stories back into the public’s scope. Stith Thompson claimed that “Many adults who had long ago dropped their interest in the fairy tale unexpectedly found great pleasure in this old product of the folk imagination” (Thompson, 1977)

**Chapter 2: Survey Group**

In order to find out if the above arguments hold any merit, a survey was undertaken (Fairy tales and animation, 2016) in which a variety of questions were asked regarding the authors that the adaptations were taken from and included a list of films made by Disney with a list of options to choose from in order to determine what the public thought these adaptations were based off of. The questions were made in such a way in order to find out whether or not the adaptations have truly obscured the original.

Using the age groups of 25 and above, under 25 and overall age groups, the following results are segments taken from the overall research and not the full content of the survey in order to maintain relevance to the essay. Unless specified in the visual guides or essay, the pie charts used are of the overall age groups.
In regards to people’s knowledge of the authors investigated, the above figures show the percentage of people who knew who each author was. The study group seemed more aware of who The Grimm Brothers were (Figure 2 - 76%) and Hans Christian Andersen (Figure 1 - 59%), as opposed to Charles Perrault (Figure 3- 6%).

This could be related to outside sources, with shows such as the movie ‘The Brothers Grimm’ (Gilliam, 2005) and the TV show ‘Grimm’ (Carpenter, 2011) attributing to the publics familiarity with ‘The Grimm Brothers’ and their popularity.
Although people were largely unaware of Charles Perrault, this did not affect the public’s knowledge of his work, as a large percentage seemed aware of the origins of Sleeping Beauty (Figure 4- 63%) and Cinderella (Figure 5- 53%) being fairy tales.

In the instance of Perrault, it could possibly be stated that the adaptors did not give enough credit to the writer, though it is more likely that these results were due to outside sources not advertising him as much as The Grimm Brothers were.

Is it enough that people seemed aware of the origins of the adaptations being fairy tale stories, or is it in actuality an offence that the public are aware of the origins but are somewhat oblivious of the creators?

In regards to Hans Christian Andersen, more peoples seemed aware of the origins of ‘The little Mermaid’ (Figure 7 - 45%) as opposed to ‘Frozen (Figure 6- 35%)’. As seen in figure 6, 51% of people thought ‘Frozen’ was an original story by Disney, and it could be argued that this is due to the drastic change in title, which could have worked to further obscure the origin of the adapted source, as the new title is such a change from the original ‘The Snow Queen’.

Although the above results could be put down to the change in title, the results to the stories by The Grimm Brothers, as seen in figures 8 and 9, contradict these findings.

Surprisingly, looking at figure 8, 45% of people were aware of ‘Snow White’s’ origins, and as seen in figure 9, 73% were aware of the origins of ‘Tangled’, even though, like ‘Frozen’, the title went through a drastic change from originally being titled ‘Rapunzel’. Once again, it could be said that this is simply due to the popularity of The Grimm Brothers, as it cannot be firmly stated that it is due to the change in titles, as the results seen in figures 6 and 9 of ‘Frozen’ and ‘Tangled’ show such contradictions in the statistics.
When assessing the individual survey responses (Borg, Week 8, 2016), a correlation was attempted to be found between the contemporary examples of films versus the older examples. From the data collected, there does not seem to be any significant link in the individual examples in regards to whether people knew the author of the story and whether they knew that the adaptations were based on a fairy tale or not.

An example of this was seen when assessing the individual age groups looking at the work of Hans Christian Andersen. With ‘The Little Mermaid’, in figure 10, 64% of people over 25 years of age knew of both Andersen and the films origins as a fairy tale, whereas, as seen in figure 11, only 15% of the under 25 age group were aware of these factors.

When looking at the more contemporary example of ‘Frozen’, also by Hans Christian Andersen, as seen in figure 12, only 27% of the over 25 age group knew of both Andersen and the origins as a fairy tale, whilst when looking at figure 13, it can be seen that only 13% of the under 25 group were aware of both.

This could circle back to the idea of the changes in title being a factor. It could also be argued as being due to the older versions possibly being more familiar to the public as fairy tales; however, the results when looking at The Grimm Brothers contradict this.

When taking the results of stories by the Grimm brothers, the exact opposite to the above was seen. People were more aware of the contemporary example of ‘Tangled’, where, as seen in figure 14,
73% of the over 25 age group knew of both The Grimm Brothers and the origins of the story as a fairy tale, along with 55% of the under 25 age group knowing both, as can be seen in figure 15.

With the older example of The Grimm Brothers ‘Snow White’, however, looking at figure 16, only 36% of the over 25 group and in figure 17, 38% of the under 25 age group were aware of both factors.

These findings, although limited, forfeit the theory that the older versions would be more familiar as a fairy tale adaptation, as well as the idea that it is the title change that causes the shift in results, as both sets of findings contradict each other.

Popularity of the author seems the most consistent and plausible answer when assessing obscurity and awareness, as when looking at Charles Perrault’s ‘The Sleeping Beauty’ and ‘Cinderella’ in regards to people being both aware of him and the origins of the work, only 3% (both with Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty) of the under 25 age group, as seen in figures 18 and 21, knew of both Perrault and the film’s origins as a fairy tale, whereas none of the over 25 group knew of either, as can be seen in figures 19 and 20.
**Conclusion:**

*When a story is ‘transformed from one medium to another’, the changes in its plot, character, description etc. are inescapable. (Stone, 1988)*

Although Disney has created films with many changes when compared to the originals, merely stating ‘Disney has obscured and undermined the original source’, or that ‘Disney has encouraged people to be more open about fairy tales whilst keeping true to them’ are both statements open to further debate. This is an area of uncertainty, and neither statement is true. There are many factors that can provide evidence for both statements, such as the statistics seen above with regards to people’s knowledge, as well as factoring in the popularity of the authors themselves in popular culture and society, as was seen with The Grimm Brothers.

Another possible factor which could attribute to the obscurity of the fairy tales could be that, along with changes to the stories, the titles were also changed when they were re-made. Two contemporary examples of this that can be seen are ‘Frozen’, which was originally titled ‘The Snow Queen’, and ‘Tangled’ which was originally titled ‘Rapunzel’. Although it is impossible to accurately come to a conclusion on this point, it is possible to argue that these changes could have affected people’s answers, as they may have been aware of the original title and not the re-make, or vice versa, thus affecting the results and becoming a factor in the obscurity of the tales.

Due to this, it can be concluded that the argument of whether or not Disney have obscured the origins of the adaptations and to what extent stands as there being a line between the both. It can be said that the fact that the stories that have been adapted by Disney in their own vision has made them more palatable and viewable to all audiences, but, due to this, have lost some of the original source and charm, as, even with being an adaptation, people were still somewhat unaware to the origins, as seen in the figures previously discussed.
Even with the changes made to the stories and content; with only certain elements of the original being kept, people still seemed open to learning about the originals, as can be seen in figure 22, with 57% of the public stating that they would read the adapted sources, and 47% stating that it would depend on the story.

The amount of people correctly answering the questions in the survey show that Disney’s adaptations have affected people’s knowledge of the originals to a large enough extent to be noticeable, but not enough that the value of the originals have been diminished. This can also be seen in figure 22, which shows how people were willing to read the original stories.

Although it is fair to state that the original authors have gained some obscurity, Disney cannot be seen as the sole reason for this, as there are many factors, along with the previously discussed points, which could impact this; such as change in times, technology and culture.

‘As human beings have sought to adapt to changing environments over the centuries, they have adapted their tales’ (Zipes, 2011)

Much like the quote above states, over many years stories have simply changed with the times, both through film and word of mouth. With these statements in mind, it can be stated that such changes to the originals were inevitable.

These conclusions have been made largely from the survey results (Borg, Week 7, 2016). The reference literature used the idea of discussing adaptation with Disneyfication throughout in order to underpin the findings from the survey; both elements being used together in order to answer this essay’s subject sufficiently.

Although the sample group was small and the research itself was possibly flawed, for the sake of this essay, the numbers will be taken as correct, although to get a more concise answer in the future, a more detailed study would need to be made and the questions themselves could be taken further.
Bibliography


**Key Words:**

**Fairy Tale**- A type of short story that typically features folkloric and fantasy characters, such as dwarves, elves, mermaids, goblins, trolls etc. as well as magic or enchantments.

**Adaptation**- The mode employed to change/re-create a known or popular text.

**Obscurity**- The state of being unknown, inconspicuous or unimportant.

**Disneyfication**- Applying a simplified aesthetic to something that has the potential to be more thought provoking

**Contemporary**- A newer/more recent example of something.

**Comparison**- To compare two or more different things to see what similarities/differences they have.

**Survey**- Building a general review and examination of something.

**Awareness**- The extent of knowledge or perception that a person has on a specific subject.

**Statistics**- The collection and analysis of information and the mode in which it is collected to gain an overall view of the subject.

**Authors**- A writer of a book or story, or a writer of a piece of writing.