

RESEARCH ARTICLE**The Changing Shape of Happily Ever After: From Classical Fairy Tales to Contemporary Disney Readaptations**

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Abstract:

For centuries, fairy tales have comforted and assured the audience that no matter how big the obstacle is, there is surely happiness at the end of it. Yet, the notion of “Happily ever after” has never conveyed a single meaning, but it has gradually evolved over time. Fairy tales across literary and cultural history have always reflected society’s shifting ideas of love, identity, fulfilment and belonging. This paper examines how the meaning of “happily ever after” has changed from the literary version of the tales to the modern Disney adaptations of the tales. Drawing from the works of Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Anderson, Disney brought its own retellings of the fairy tales that associated happiness with love, marriage, societal elevation, sacrificial behaviour, security and societal acceptance. This paper argues that Disney’s initial retellings of the fairy tales supported this tradition and contributed to the popularisation of movies that were romance-centric and idolised the male characters. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *The Sleeping Beauty* (1959) followed this trend. However, with the progression of society, the modern live-action retellings of Disney fairy tales have moved beyond this trend. The movies present happiness through self-discovery, freedom, emotional growth, identity and belonging. By exploring this transformation, the paper argues that “happily ever after” doesn’t have a fixed meaning but is a constantly evolving notion that reveals how each generation chooses to define it.

Keywords: Disney Fairy Tales, Dark Endings, Fairy Tale Retellings, Happily Ever After, Happiness

Introduction

Fairy tales have a particular archetype that has been employed for generations. Although the plot may be varied, the structure of the narratives remains the same.

Some fairy tales have bridged generations. While some stories might go out of fashion, a select group of classic tales are enduringly popular. They include stories of princes and princesses, of witches and magic both good and evil. And, for the most part, they have positive endings, with the protagonists overcoming challenges and living ‘happily ever after’. (Hewitt)

The female protagonist may be oppressed by the villain, castles and characters may be cursed, the kingdoms may fall into darkness, and impossible tasks may lie in the way of the hero, but somewhere amidst all this lies the comforting certainty of happily ever after. The phrase is deeply embedded in the fairy tales that it often feels as if it is impossible to imagine the narratives without it. Yet, happiness is never a constant idea with

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only one meaning. The idea of happily ever after has been shifting and means different things for different generations; it evolves alongside altering cultural expectations, social values and modern ways of imagining fulfilment itself.

The early fairy tales view happiness entirely differently from the way the modern audience comprehends it. According to the literary trends from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, happiness was often linked to marriage, security, survival, and the restoration of the social order after adversities. Over time, fairy tales were repeatedly reshaped, reinterpreted and adopted by new storytellers who gradually changed what fulfilment and happiness looked like. No institution has had a greater influence on this transformation than Disney. Disney's animated versions of the classic fairy tales have familiarised generations of audiences to a version of fairy tales where happiness is associated with true love, romance, marriage, and the dream of finding one's "prince charming". Yet, the storytelling in the contemporary Disney fairy tale movies has revealed an equally fascinating change. In recent years, Disney has been rethinking and reimagining the very endings it once popularised, stressing that happiness can not only be achieved through romance or marriage but also through empowerment, transformation, healing, self-discovery, courage, freedom and emotional independence. On tracing the journey of happily ever after from the narratives of Charles Perrault, The Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson to Disney's animated version of the classic fairy tales to their live-action reimagining, a crucial truth is discovered that there was never a single meaning for happily ever after. Rather, it reflects the altering ways in which each generation chooses to define fulfilment and happiness for itself.

A long time ago, before being adapted into literary forms, the fairy tales existed as stories that were shared orally by storytellers, which were the reflections of the beliefs, norms, fears, and desires of the society and were often employed for entertainment purposes. In a world often shaped by uncertainty, class division, poverty, and deeply constructed social roles, happiness was rarely imagined as emotional fulfilment or personal freedom. Instead, happiness meant stability and security; it meant surviving the adversities and finding a place in a world that often tries to strip away the autonomy and one's control over their own life and destiny. Unfortunately, the early fairy tales addressed the same difficulties in their endings. For instance, in the original story of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Anderson, Ariel is unable to fulfil her quest, and the prince gets married to Vanessa. Ariel is given two choices by the sea witch: either to kill the prince or to meet her doom, but she chooses the latter and turns into sea foam in the end. Similarly, in Grimm's version of *Cinderella*, her stepsister chops off her toe to make the glass slipper fit her, but it doesn't. This version of the tale is disturbing for the audience. Also,

The Grimm brothers' rendition of Rapunzel featured violence as well. In this tale, when the witch bars the prince from seeing Rapunzel, he jumps from the tower in despair and lands in bushes decorated with thorns that pierce his eyes. Fortunately, the two lovers reunite, and Rapunzel's tears, vested with healing powers, restore the prince's sight. (Anastas)

Additionally, Snow White's original story presents the Evil Queen's pursuit of acceptance and dominance and her vain obsession with beauty. The Evil Queen's jealousy leads her to the use of black magic and multiple attempts to murder her stepdaughter, Snow White. In the Brothers Grimm's version, the Evil Queen's brutal punishment comes in the form of red-hot shoes that lead her to her death. The early literary fairy tales were intended for a mature audience, so the narrative had darker themes and gruesome elements, and the punishments for doing evil were severe.

The original endings often featured gruesome punishments for villains and tragic consequences for characters who strayed from societal norms. This darkness wasn't meant to be gratuitous but rather a

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reflection of the world in which these stories originated. Exploring this Dark Side allows us to understand the historical context in which fairy tales were created and appreciate their complexity as both entertainment and social commentary. (Holloway)

Although modern fairy tales present soothing, happy endings, most early fairy tales had complicated happy endings, and some tales didn't even end well. The early authors, such as the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, complicated the idea of happily ever after by introducing endings where female protagonists suffered and made sacrifices; in these stories, emotional loss was central to the narrative. Their tales revealed that happily ever after in the fairy tales is more complicated than the popular culture presented it.

In Anderson's *The Little Mermaid* (1837), it is noticed that he made Ariel a sacrificial heroine. She doesn't achieve the ideal romantic ending of getting married to the prince charming; instead, she sacrifices her voice, leaves her home, endures pain, and ultimately loses the human life she cherished so much. She is given another chance by Ursula, and she is told that if she kills the prince, she may get her mermaid tale and her old life back. However, Ariel refuses and turns into sea foam. It was seen that her desires weren't rewarded. Similarly, in Brother Grimms' Rapunzel, the happy ending isn't granted easily. Rapunzel suffers in the hands of Mother Gothel, and the prince goes blind by falling into the thorns; however, they both meet in the end, and the prince's sight is restored by Rapunzel's magical tears.

While the Hans Christian Anderson version might seem sick and twisted to the modern reader, at the time it was seen as both tragic and uplifting. Indeed, the Danish writer wanted to show how noble self-sacrifice could be – though he undoubtedly also used the tale to warn his young readers about the dangers of having unrealistic dreams and even trying to break out of the social class you were born in. (Hewitt)

The typical endings of the early fairy tales relied more on cultural reassurance rather than fulfilment of individual desires. The tales reminded the audiences that these stories that seem innocent comprise layers of meaning and that our comprehension of what is "appropriate" has evolved so much over time.

Over time, ... the fairy tales have been sanitized and tailored to suit the sensibilities of different eras and audiences. The simplification of these stories has led to a focus on the central characters and the core message, sometimes at the expense of the rich tapestry of supporting characters and the complexity of the original narratives. (Yanez)

Disney's first animated fairy tale was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* that came out in 1937. It was observed that Disney had entirely changed the archetype of the tale, sanitising it and making it entertaining and pleasant for the viewers who desperately needed an escape from the harsh realities during the time of the Great Depression in America. The literary versions of the fairy tales were transformed into visual form by Walt Disney, who popularised the idea of happily ever after. As Disney began adapting the fairy tales, the audience started to associate fairy tales with the ways Disney portrayed them, i.e., with magic, romance, transformation and the notion that in the end all problems are solved. The modern audience forgot about the dark endings of the fairy tales; instead, the inspiring songs, pretty and graceful heroines, and mostly bloodless resolutions replaced the original narratives in the public imagination. For instance, Disney's Ariel didn't lose against Ursula; instead, Ariel fulfilled the bargain and kissed Prince Charming and got her happy ending of getting married to the prince. However, it can be noted that the sea witch dies at the hands of Prince Eric. Similarly, Snow White wakes up from the cursed sleep as Prince Charming kisses her. This can also be observed in Disney's *The Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Aurora wakes up from the deep slumber as a result of "true love's kiss" by Prince Philip. Also, in *Aladdin* (1992), the kingdom of Agrabah is saved from the evil clutches of Jafar by

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Aladdin and the Genie; in the story, the happily ever after comes by Jafar's defeat and the marriage of Jasmine and Aladdin. The common link among these stories is that the male protagonist or the hero defeats the villain and saves the damsel in distress.

Without the interference of a male character, no fairy tale reaches to its happy ending. Seeing men in active roles and women in passive roles young children construct ideas of gender role from fairy tales at a very early age. (Sharif 3)

Fairy tales reflect the cultural thoughts embedded in society in that particular generation. Disney's fairy tales glorified the hero, and the heroines were portrayed as passive, gentle, kind and sacrificial. The heroines in the fairy tales were shown to be rewarded for their passivity and sacrificial behaviour. In early societies, the ultimate goal in a girl's life was to secure a beneficial marriage that got them reorganisation in the society. This very idea was popularised by Disney in his fairy tale adaptations. The early Disney heroines, such as Snow White, Aurora and Cinderella, were depicted as pretty and passive princesses who were dependent on the heroes for survival. In these fairy tales, it can be observed that happily ever after is closely tied to the pursuit of love, marriage and societal elevation. The princess's journey doesn't end with autonomy or freedom, but with being rescued and getting married.

Many fairy tales presented this idea; however, the three waves of feminism changed the ways in which women were portrayed in the stories. Disney also had to include the changes in the characterisation and portrayal of female characters. The twenty-first century brought major transformations in Disney storytelling and characterisation. The modern heroines of Disney fairy tale movies were no longer sacrificial, and the meaning of "happily ever after" was altered, too. As social discussions about feminism, empowerment, identity, family, emotional growth, and cultural representation changed, Disney gradually started to rethink what happily ever after means again. The contemporary fairy tales no longer portray romantic love and marriage as the only destination of happily ever after. Instead, happiness arises from self-discovery, empowerment, emotional well-being, etc.

Rapunzel: Okay, Flynn Ryder, I'm prepared to offer you a deal.

Flynn: Deal?

Rapunzel: Look this way. Do you know what these are?

Flynn: You mean the lantern thing they do for the princess?

Rapunzel: Lanterns? I knew they weren't stars. Well, tomorrow evening they will light the night sky with these lanterns. You will act as my guide, take me to these lanterns, and return me home safely.

Then, and only then, will I return your satchel to you. That is my deal. ("Tangled/Transcript")

For instance, in *Tangled* (2010), Rapunzel negotiates her own freedom with the help of Flynn Rider (the Hero), and instead of being a damsel in distress, she saves Flynn from getting caught and even from dying when Mother Gothel tries to kill him with a dagger. In *Frozen* (2013), Disney has entirely erased the character of Prince Charming from the storyline. Instead of focusing on romantic love, the movie focuses on familial love. Anna thinks that true love's kiss will save her heart from freezing; however, the act of true love comes from her sister Elsa and the bond between the two sisters. In *Frozen*, happily ever after is not achieved through romantic love but empowerment, emotional connection, familial love, and sacrifice. In the movie, Elsa is depicted as a princess with magical powers, but she is reserved because she doesn't want to hurt anyone. In her journey, she is termed as "dangerous" because of her powers, but Elsa not only learns to control her magical powers but also to embrace her identity.

This complex, nuanced character [Elsa] has raised the bar for the creation of all future princesses

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because Elsa teaches girls to embrace their strengths and differences in all varieties and forms. Although Disney's version of feminism is still flawed, creating female characters that have agency and strong characteristics is a big step forward and away from the presentations of princesses as agentless young women. (Feder)

Even in Disney's live-action retellings of fairy tales, such as *Maleficent* (2014) this can be noted that Aurora's curse is not reversed by the kiss of true love by a prince charming but through Maleficent's maternal love and emotional redemption. Similarly, in *Snow White* (2025), the main focus is on portraying Snow White as an independent and compelling leader; in the movie, the character of Prince Charming has been removed.

Through *Snow White*, Disney attempts to modernize the original story by altering the plot to step away from the classic plotline of Snow White being saved by a prince. This disappointing adaptation of the classic fairy tale forces themes of feminism, female "empowerment" and independence, which comes at the cost of a coherent storyline. Rather than making Snow White a powerful heroine, the film portrays her as an entitled brat. (Russell)

However, this portrayal was rejected by the audience as she seemed overbearing and passive to them, and her character didn't show any transformation. Also, the idea that romance and empowerment can't exist together gives a negative message to the young audience.

Conclusion

"As fairytales were passed down like treasured heirlooms from writer to writer, they dramatically evolved from sinister historical accounts to exaggerated, violent tales to colourful, glorified stories in which everyone lives "happily ever after"" (Anastas). The contemporary readaptations of the fairy tales reveal that happily ever after can no longer be associated with only one meaning. It may involve romance, but it can be found equally in self-discovery, familial bonds, emotional and mental well-being, freedom, and cultural belonging. The history of the fairy tales reveals that the endings of the fairy tales have evolved along with society itself. From the darker versions to Anderson's sacrifices, from the Brothers Grimm's morals to Disney's romantic idealism to empowerment in the live-action adaptations of the fairy tales, the meaning of "happily ever after" never remained fixed. Disney's contemporary fairy tales are a testament that "happily ever after" is no longer about encountering true love and getting married. Instead, it has become a reflection of altering cultural values and a reorganisation that happy endings can take many forms.

The emphasis on romance and "happily ever after" in many fairy-tales can also be seen as a reflection of societal expectations and the desire to instil a belief in true love and partnership. While this can be limiting or problematic if taken too literally, it can also be argued that it encourages girls to dream big and aspire to relationships built on mutual respect and equality. After all, modern interpretations of these stories often redefine these roles, showcasing strong, independent female characters who forge their own destinies. (Yanez)

Disney's readaptations of its own classic fairy tales remind the audience that the most powerful magic of storytelling doesn't lie only in preserving the old endings but consistently redefining what "happily ever after" truly means.

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