

Extended Essay

Title: Shrek and the Postmodern Subversion of Fairy Tales

RQ: To what extent does Shrek's screenplay use postmodernist linguistic techniques to subvert fairy tales and represent the evolution of societal values?

English A: Language and Literature

Category 3

Word Count: 3996

Citation Style: MLA 8th Edition

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Anatomy of A Fairy Tale	4
Perversion or Revolution of the Genre?	5
Analysis of Shrek as a Postmodern Artwork to Subvert Fairy Tales	6
i) Self-Reflexivity	6
ii) Intertextuality	9
iii) Humor and Satire	10
Conclusion: The significance of this movie	15
Works Cited	17

Introduction

In the literary world, there are a plethora of different types of texts for people to indulge in. Although many people have preferences in the types of stories that they read, an aspect of literature that most people have engaged and fallen in love with during the formative years of their life are fairytales. Fairytales have always been a quintessential part of many children's lives, captivating generations upon generations of children since the 1800s. A significant driving force in spreading these tales globally through the silver screen has been Disney, whose simplified revisions of these tales for a more modern era has seen skyrocketing success. However, the cost of this immense popularity is the normalization of stereotypical ideologies, with a prevalence of rigid definitions of archetypal heroes and villains or narrative structures being preferred. However, there are examples of various modern fairy tales that deviate from this model. One of the most popular of all is the 'Shrek' movie franchise. Shrek's bold attempt at completely flipping the narrative of how fairy tales are perceived not only made it one of the most popular animated movies of all time, as the first movie was the first animated film to receive an Academy Award (Oscars), but also made it one of the most thought-provoking pieces of work that redefined the fairytale genre. Shrek's subversion and parody of the genre, specifically the culture popularized by Disney, can be considered as a postmodernist take on the genre. Postmodernism is an art movement initiated in late 20th century as a result of skepticism against modernism, similar to movements before it as art forms progressed alongside society. This essay will analyze the first Shrek movie to explore the postmodern elements present in the screenplay of Shrek to evolve the fairy tale genre, but also act as a reflection of how society's values change overtime.

Anatomy of A Fairy Tale

In order to understand how Shrek's cultural impact in terms of fairy tales to a reasonable degree of accuracy, it is important to decipher what our society classifies and perceives as a 'fairytale'. However, there is no conclusive answer as this matter is still greatly shrouded by ambiguity and debate due to the definition and sentiments surrounding this genre being varied throughout time with multiple perspectives.

Many folklorists and linguists have presented conflicting ideas about their classification of fairy tales throughout history. One popular take is from the legendary fantasy writer JRR Tolkien (Flieger 2), where he characterizes fairy tales to be taking place in a separate fantastical land known as 'Faerie'. Key elements of this includes magic and other fantastical elements, however being presented as real and abiding by the rules established under the newly created world. On the other hand, Russian Folklorist Vladimir Propp aimed to classify fairy tales on 31 distinct narrative elements in his book "Morphology of The Fairy Tale" (*Zipes When Dreams Came True* 3). However, the public perception of fairy tales is far more different than how folklorists and literary scholars perceive it, as most of us are more familiar with the famous 'Disneyfied' versions of these fairy tales, with charming princes and princesses who eventually live happily ever after.

Given the sheer variation in the perception of this genre by both scholars and the public, it is difficult to define it, however there is a general agreement upon similar narrative and stylistic elements present in these short stories which "hold a mirror up to their society, reflecting the anxieties and preoccupations of the era" as pointed out by scholar Andrew Teverson (43). These were usually followed by 'morals' or lessons aimed at both adults and children (*Zipes When Dreams Came True* 1), serving as a reflection of the societal values from the fairy tales' historical

period of origin. Based off of this, Shrek can be safely classified as a fairy tale movie. Firstly, based on Tolkien's characterization, it takes place in an alternate magical land that is real to its inhabitants. It also follows most of the narrative outlines established by Propp and the layman's idea of a fairy tale, which usually aligns itself to the Disney movies. Finally, it contains a plethora of our beloved fairy tale characters moving the plot forward. However, classifications tend to be quite broad; so, despite meeting the broad criteria of a fairy tale, examination of the finer details tells a different story.

Perversion or Revolution of the Genre?

Present day society is vastly different from 17th century society, and likewise so are our values. Present day values are more liberal with an emphasis on fairness and inclusivity. Since fairy tales were originally intended as cautionary tales as a reflection of society and hence having dark themes as seen in Grimm's fairy tales, these tales evolved overtime as fairy tales branched out from its European origins. An example of this is Anne Duggan's discussion of Charles Perrault's 'Little Red Riding Hood' and its iterations, which sees the core plot have variations completely different from the original whilst also maintaining a thematic commonality (TEDx Talks 02:17–08:00). Shrek the movie was adapted from the picture book of the same name and also shares similar themes, characters and overarching plot of an ogre rescuing a 'princess' from a dragon guarded tower. However, Shrek the animated movie takes a different approach with a deeper story and clearer implied 'layers' that are easily interpretable, just like one of movie's most famous lines from titular character Shrek (Adamson *Shrek* 00:27:16- 00:27:24)

"Onions have layers. Ogres have layers! Onions have layers. You get it? We both have layers." - *Shrek*

The depth comes from the nuance in dialogue amongst the characters that leads to unexpected plot threads and hides an ocean's worth of social commentary under the bare skeletal structure of a classic 'fairy tale movie'. In fact, it seems to be a direct response to Disney's sanitization of the fairy tale genre that began in the early 90s with 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarves' and the permanently associating all kinds of fairy tales with Disney movies. One of Shrek's key aims was to break the monopoly that Disney runs over the genre and the beginning of the new millennium was the perfect time to do it given Disney's poor financial situation after a few lackluster releases (Mínguez López "Intertextualidad y Juego Literario En Shrek"). It also aimed to break and rebuild some of the harmful stereotypes, such as portraying passivity as the ideal feminine trait, set forward by Disney and making entertainment far more inclusive.

Analysis of Shrek as a Postmodern Artwork to Subvert Fairy Tales

Postmodernism can be characterized as an extension of modernism as it comes 'after modernism'. It shares many similarities in the experimentation and skepticism observed in the modernist era of art. Common characteristics may be the presence of irony or parody, satirical elements, self-reflexivity and most prominently intertextuality amongst many others ("General Introduction to Postmodernism"). The following section will analyze these different characteristics of postmodernism and how they present themselves in the film and attempt to show how a postmodern approach allowed it to successfully redefine a genre.

i) Self-Reflexivity

The self-reflexive characteristic of postmodern art forms is prevalent in Shrek. Self-reflexive can be defined as ones that are "marked by or making reference to its own artificiality or contrivance" ("Self-Reflexive"). In Shrek, self-awareness of being a fairy tale movie is one of the key methods

utilized in parodying the existing stereotypes of fairy tale movies. Consider the first scene of the movie which starts with (*Shrek* 00:42:00):

“Once upon a time there was a lovely princess..... She waited in the dragon's keep in the highest room of the tallest tower for her true love and true love's first kiss...”

This first scene plays out just as people expect a typical fairy tale movie to do so, beginning with *once upon and time* and continuing to talk about a *damsel in distress* that needs to be saved from a dragon with *true loves first kiss*. This format of fairy tales is very recognizable and a classic stereotype people associate with when they are asked about what fairy tales mean to them. Beginning in such a way instills a sense of familiarity and safety within the audience as they feel that the movie will play out exactly as they expected a normal fairy tale movie to play out. However, the very purpose of this was to lure people into a false sense of security before quickly establishing the real nature of the movie in the next part with (*Shrek* 00:01:27):

“(laughs) Like that's ever gonna happen. What a load of - (toilet flush)”

Shrek literally uses that page of the fairy tale as toilet paper and quickly dismisses the silly nature of what he just read. This suggests extreme self-reflexivity, that despite being marketed as a fairy tale movie, the movie intentionally separating itself from the stereotypical idea of a Disney fairy tale and promptly points out the unrealistic and absurd nature true love's first kiss in relation to the real world. This subversion of expectations and sudden breaking of the audiences' false sense of security from the first few lines immediately draws people in to this new experience of an atypical fairy tale movie that the vast majority of people never experienced before.

Following this scene with Smash Mouth's 'All Star' truly solidifies that this is very different from the fairy tale movies that people are used to, because in terms of the music used in movies people expect softer, more melodic and more contemporary tunes rather than modern pop music deeply interlaced with meme culture. It plays over a montage of Shrek following his 'deeply disgusting morning routine' and the diction suggests to viewers that this is also not the typical 'prince charming protagonist that they were expecting'. In fact, the title of the movie is derived from the "Yiddish expression that means "horror" or "terror," (Zipes "On Re-Reading William Steig's Book Shrek!") suggesting that Shrek the ogre is a terrifying personality, the complete opposite of the typical prince charming. Hence, the movie is self-aware that the main character is such a hideous beast and it capitalizes on that in the first few scenes to amplify the impact of this subversion on the audience.

Furthermore, self-reflexivity is further shown in the very next scene with the self-referential description of ogres with the townsmen, especially in the line (*Shrek* 00:04:30):

This is the part where you run away.

This shows self-awareness of how a movie would typically play out in a situation like this. It not only suggests the movie's awareness of a piece of fiction and essentially 'fixing' the narrative so that the men run away, as they are expected to do so, when they froze in place. Shrek's tone of delivery has a certain element of sarcasm and playfulness to it, as if he's exploiting the terrifying narrative established around himself based on what people expect ogres to be like. Although, whether or not he actually does these horrific things is left ambiguous due to it being a children's movie and requiring to have a likable character to fit the broad definition of a fairy tale.

ii) Intertextuality

Intertextuality refers to the relationship between texts and how they influence one another (“Definition of Intertextuality”). Although intertextuality is intertwined with self-reflexivity (ex. Pop culture reference such as “Smash Mouth), more notable examples include allusions to other fairy tale elements such as characters, references to story elements and famous or clearly recognizable actions are presented in a literal way. The literal presentation allows the Disney veil to be dropped around these characters to give audience a true picture of how these characters would function in a realistic context. This adds to the satirical and humorous element of the movie which shall be emphasized upon later. This form of intertextuality provides “demystifying comments” about these characters to show viewers the true nature of these characters (Mínguez López “Intertextualidad y Juego Literario En Shrek”). These kinds of character descriptions show the strength of language in terms of building context. This allows viewers to break out of the shell that Disney movies have created for us and view fairy tale elements under a modern-day context with modern day values. For instance, the following descriptions of fairy tale creatures made by characters in the movie:

- 1) **Pinocchio:** Described as a *possessed toy* by a guard, implying the terrifying nature of an anthropomorphic doll as the term possessed is used with paranormal entities/apparitions; further emphasized by the guard’s reaction of disgust (*Shrek* 00:05:27).
- 2) **Gingerbread Man:** Referred to as a ‘monster’ by Lord Farquaad (along with all other fairy tale creatures). Implies the sheer absurdity of the existence of these creatures since under the context of the real world they would be considered as monsters (00:16:46)
- 3) **Cinderella:** Described by the magic mirror as a “mentally abused shut-in from a kingdom far, far away” whose hobbies are “cooking and cleaning for her two evil sisters.” (00:18:27)

- 4) **Snow White:** Described to be a “a cape-wearing girl from the land of fancy” who “lives with seven other men” and is not easy to get. The mirror recommends kissing “her dead, frozen lips and find out what a live wire she is.” (00:18:49)
- 5) **Princess Fiona:** Although a new character, her description fits into traditional ‘castle guarded by dragon’ trope of fairy tales “(She’s) a fiery redhead from a dragon-guarded castle surrounded by hot boiling lava! But don't let that cool you off. She's a loaded pistol who likes pina coladas and getting caught in the rain.” – (00:19:00).

The diction and tone used for the three princess’s description by the magic mirror is a reference to the popular show ‘The Bachelorette’ and is a good example of intertextuality. This not only subverts viewers by shedding light on the nature of the king’s pursuit for a princess motivated by the desire of ‘role fulfillment’, akin to ‘The Bachelorette’ but also effortlessly showing the popular portrayals of these female characters for what they truly are. It outlines the abuse that Cinderella had faced, the absurdity of Snow White’s circumstances and also references to the typical nature of ‘damsel in distress characters locked away in a tower’ through Fiona. In modern day narratives with elements such as abuse as treated in a more dramatic and serious way, however in popular fairy tales like Cinderella the general public tends to ignore it to a great extent. This all ties back into the contextual nature of language, where the context set by Disney’s flowery and overly optimistic presentation is decontextualized by the Magic Mirror. However, the most significant uses of intertextuality can be seen paired with humor, which is what will be analyzed in the following section.

iii) Humor and Satire

The humor in Shrek is one of its hallmark features that made it so popular in the first place. Shrek can be considered as a satirical movie with its ridiculing of the fairy tale meta narrative. The post-

modern elements mentioned above are extensions of this as they are used to directly cause or strengthen the humorous elements of the movie. By the broadest definition of the term, 'satire' refers to works that ridicules something by upholding its vices or stupidity. Shrek aims to ridicule the fairy tales' formula that humans have become accustomed to by exposing its sheer ridiculousness, as seen in the examples above. Scholars have classified satire into 3 types: Horatian, a more comical form of satire, Juvenalian, which is darker and more hostile, and Menippean satire, which targets certain worldviews regarding a matter (Mahler). Shrek comprises mostly of Horatian satire, with the aim of entertaining the audience by ridiculing Disney, however it does have some Menippean elements as it challenges people's views towards these fairy tale conventions.

One of the key satirical elements used to create humor is 'incongruity', which is essentially the contrast between what people expects to see with what they actually see. Many philosophers and scholars have theorized that incongruity creates laughter, an example of which can be seen in the very first scene of Shrek where the audience expects to see a traditional fairy tale movie but receives something completely different. French philosopher Henri Bergson published a collection of essays 'Laughter' in the 1900s, where he developed his theory of humor and expanded on how incongruity creates laughter. He says that, "The laughable element Consist(s) of a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being" (6). This means that elements that are considered to be humorous tend to be 'out of place', where the actions of characters are completely oblivious to the realities of their surroundings. Shrek has a plethora of examples where this sort of 'mechanical inelasticity' can be observed.

The scene that I will analyze is princess Fiona's rescue from the tower from 00:35:15 to 00:43:26 in the movie (*Shrek*). This entire section is a subversion of viewers expectations from the traditional route this storyline usually progresses in. As implied in the very first scene by the fairy tale book Shrek is reading in the toilet (00:01:08):

“Many brave knights had attempted to free her from this dreadful prison, but none prevailed. She waited in the dragon’s keep in the highest room of the tallest tower for her true love and true love’s first kiss.”

The implication here is that the ‘knight’ must honorably defeat the dragon and save the princess, with Shrek’s tone emphasizing on how many have failed, signifying the danger. However, the immediate scene as mentioned previously foreshadow to viewers that this narrative strand may not progress as one might expect. The way this scene plays out is the complete opposite of what is expected, with Shrek directly ending up in the princess’s tower without defeating the dragon. The humor in this scene comes from the fact that all characters around Shrek and Donkey still follow traditional fairy tale norms. An example of this is the pouting of Fiona’s lips as she expects a true loves kiss, and the old English language she initially uses to speak to Shrek (00:35:52 – 00:36:05):

I am, awaiting a knight so bold as to rescue me.

.....

But wait, Sir Knight. This be-ith our first meeting. Should it not be a wonderful, romantic moment?

Fiona’s use of this style of English is an example of anachronism, which is a reference to the ‘high society’ language that people of royal blood used to converse with each other, who considered

other dialects to be inferior. This would be fitting for a princess who grew up in a castle around kings and queens, perfectly fitting into the role that society has assigned to her. She expects her ‘knight’ to follow due procedure as written in the books, and hence she acts accordingly. However, the movie has already established from the beginning that it is tonally more consistent with modern day language and pop culture, thus his complete undermining of this situation and hastily waking Fiona up causes her to ‘break character’ occasionally as she tries hard to keep up this act. Fiona’s insistence on staying on script leads her to make a number of remarks such as (00:36:07 – 00:36:33):

*Hey, wait. What are you doing? You should sweep me off my feet out yonder
window and down a rope onto your valiant steed.*

.....

*But we have to savor this moment! You could recite an epic poem for me. A
ballad? A sonnet! A limerick? Or something!*

The diction exemplifies Fiona’s persistence, as the subversion of her expectations regarding her rescue makes her uncomfortable. The tonal clash between modern day values and traditional fairy tales make amplify the humorous elements of these scenes. Consequently, her request for an epic poem and so on shows her desperation in staying true to the fairy tale books. She finally breaks character when she realizes that Shrek didn’t even slay the dragon, leading this exchange (00:37:01 – 00:37:12):

Fiona: *But this isn’t right! You were meant to charge in, sword drawn, banner
flying. That’s what all the other knights did.*

Shrek: Yeah, right before they burst into flames.

Fiona: That's not the point!

This perfectly illustrates the primary motivation of the characters in Shrek, the incessant need to stay on script and compulsive completionism, which adds a deeper layer of humor for those who identify it. They have certain expectations about how the story will play out, similar to the audience, but those expectations are completely undermined by our unlikely heroic dynamic duo: Shrek and Donkey. These characters do not follow the beaten path and the writers made sure to show clear discomfort and sometimes annoyance, as shown by Fiona's quote above, at this. This entire section is a prime example of incongruity as Shrek is the most out of place heroic character that one might expect as he is no prince charming, but rather a hideous ogre. This is further illustrated by Fiona's when Shrek is finally forced to remove his helmet (00:42:37):

Oh, no. This is all wrong. You're not supposed to be an ogre

This is the main reason why this section is so humorous, because unexpected twists occur in the story that the audience never expect, followed by witty wordplay from Shrek to incite laughter. The obliviousness of characters to the absurd situations they created as necessitates by the genre can be seen in other parts of the movie as well. For instance, Fiona's fight scene with Robin Hood showing the damsel in distress actually being someone who can stand up to herself. Fiona uses kung fu to fight, and a particular kick is another example of intertextuality that is a parody to a popular scene from 'The Matrix'. This scene is very amusing primarily because the Robin Hood gang never expected this and were actually trying to 'save' the princess from the hideous 'beast'.

Conclusion: The significance of this movie

The entire discussion so far has been aimed to show how exactly Shrek can be classified as a postmodern artwork due to the various elements that it shares with other works from this movement. This naturally leads to the us asking why this was done, and why it is significant in the current status quo. So far, it has been adequately proven that Shrek is not a normal fairy tale as it subverts all expectations by not only surprising the viewers, but also the characters in the movie itself. As I have already mentioned previously, Shrek meets all the criteria to be classified as a fairy tale on the surface, however it is completely deviant from typical tales if one chooses to focus more on the dialogue and the significance of the scenes. Just like fairy tales from centuries ago were a reflection of the values held by people at the time, Shrek the ‘fairy tale movie’ also is a reflection of our society. First, it shows the evolution of people’s perception of beauty. The previous analysis of the various scenes shows that Shrek as a protagonist is unnatural due to him being an ogre, however he is never punished by the narrative for being characterized as ‘ugly’. This is because the subversion multiplies as the movie progresses to give us an outcome that would be unimaginable during the Disney era. Shrek the ogre is the hero of the story, Fiona is a martial artist ogre rather than a damsel in distress, and this ‘ugly’ couple gets happily married together. This is a direct representation of the society’s attempts to break away from the unrealistic beauty norms that were previously depicted in Disney movies, with all characters being the most perfect individuals imaginable. Shrek breaks this idea of perfection and teaches the youth of our generation to accept themselves for who they are. This active distancing from the old norms exemplified best by utilizing the most interactive part of any movie, the dialogue, to present a different perspective and thereby contributing to the postmodern movement. As societies progress, their values progress with them. Art movements are a direct result of progress, with the discussed movement of

postmodernism attempting to make a statement by attacking the absurdity of the metanarrative. Shrek does exactly that by being a post-modern movie to break the metanarrative from an older society set forth by Disney and facilitate the new values our society just began to form while entering a new millennium.

Works Cited

- “Definition of Intertextuality.” *Dictionary*, www.dictionary.com/browse/intertextuality.
Accessed 12 Dec. 2020.
- Dirks, Tim. “Shrek (2001).” *Filmsite*, Filmsite LLC, www.filmsite.org/series-shrek.html.
Accessed 15 Oct. 2020.
- “General Introduction to Postmodernism.” *Introduction to Post Modernism*,
cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/postmodernism/modules/introduction.html.
Accessed 19 Nov. 2020.
- “Self-Reflexive.” *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/self-reflexive. Accessed 19 Nov. 2020.
- Adamson, Andrew, and Vicky Jenson. *Shrek*. DreamWorks Distribution, 2001.
- Bergson, Henri, et al. *Laughter: An Essay On The Meaning Of The Comic*. Martino Fine Books, 2014.
- Flieger, Verlyn. *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories*. UK ed., HarperCollins Publishers, 2014.
- Mahler, Adam. “Satire.” *LitCharts*, LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017, www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/satire.
- Mínguez López, Xavier. “Intertextualidad y Juego Literario En Shrek.” *Academia*,
www.academia.edu/458944/Intertextualidad_y_juego_literario_en_Shrek.

---. "Subversión e Intertextualidad En La Saga Shrek." *Didáctica. Lengua y Literatura*, vol. 24, no. 0, 2012. *Crossref*, doi:10.5209/rev_dida.2012.v24.39924.

TEDx Talks. "Transforming Our Understanding of Fairy Tales | Anne Duggan | TEDxWayneStateU." *YouTube*, uploaded by Tedx Talks, 18 May 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jit32hKZ-BM.

Teverson, Andrew. *Fairy Tale (The New Critical Idiom)*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2013.

Zipes, Jack. "On Re-Reading William Steig's Book Shrek!" *Tor.Com*, 24 Mar. 2015, www.tor.com/2010/02/05/on-re-reading-william-steigs-book-shrek.

---. *When Dreams Came True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition, Second Edition: 2nd (Second) Edition*. Taylor & Francis, Inc., 2007.