Taylor Johnson

Professor Ellis

ENG 476

25 November, 2014

Fairy Tales: The Power of Innocence

The movie *The Princess Bride*, based on the novel by William Goldman has become a classic movie in today’s society, loved for its witty comedy and fairy tale style. Despite its comedic and light hearted virtues there is also strong commentary made throughout the movie concerning fairy tales and their major impacts on society. In particular, there is evidence of an argument that discusses the importance of childhood innocence and the belief that children should remain innocent as long as possible if not forever. In *The Princess Bride* it is clear that the loss of innocence through aging is a painful and destructive process that often damages children. It is only through fairy tales that these children can be healed and returned to their pure, child-like, innocent state.

The audience is first presented a real life scenario in which a grandfather is reading *The Princess Bride* tale to his grandson. The entire reason for reading the fairy tale is predicated on the fact that the grandson is sick. At first, it would appear that his illness is just like any other cold or flu. However, an argument could be made that perhaps the grandson is sick because he has grown up too fast and lost his childhood innocence. For instance, the grandson appears to behave and act as though he is no longer a child. This can be seen when he says, “He’ll pinch my cheek. I hate that.” Many children dislike the pinching of cheeks because they feel as though they have outgrown such gestures of affection. He also reveals his tendency to behave as though he were an adult by sharing a secret glance with his mother as if to say I told you so when the grandfather does pinch his cheek. In a way, the sickness that the grandson is suffering from is a reflection of the sickness brought on by his premature loss of innocence.

Growing up too fast and loosing that child-like state is becoming a very common issue in society today. According to a few interviews of childhood professors on this topic, it is clear that growing up too fast has a negative impact on children:

Children who are rushed to grow up before they are ready or who have too many “adult level” pressures put on them may develop stress-related health problems such as nervousness, hyperactivity, eating and sleeping disorders, and headaches and stomach problems (Sweat)

Beyond this, they also lose out on the learning experiences and unique pleasures that are only available during childhood. This is the reason the grandfather has come for a visit and why he has brought along the book, *The Princess Bride*, in the hope that he could restore his grandson to his full, healthy self. Many authors in the Romantic Movement viewed fairy tales with the utmost respect, believing them to contain “some sort of hidden meaning, a secret knowledge” that children were able to uniquely relate to (Sky 365). Fairy tales had the ability to connect with children and relate in a personal way to their lives. According to Sister Mary Agna, a teacher of elementary students,

“children need fairy tales. They need to read of happy endings, of daring mischief and unequalled courage. They need the enjoyable entertainment and emotional satisfaction fairy tales provide so abundantly” (952).

Fairy tales provide children not only with important life lessons but also with exciting material that really engages their minds. This idea is furthered by Bruno Bettelheim who claims that “nothing can be as enriching and satisfying to child and adult alike as the folk fairy tale” (378). Bettelheim believes that fairy tales allow children to explore the problems they have in life and come to terms with them on their own levels. In a sense, the grandson has chosen to deal with his problems by becoming an adultoid and forcing himself away from the child-like state of innocence. Realizing this, the grandfather has brought *The Princess Bride* to help his grandson deal with his problems in a better, more enriching manner.

Within the fairy tale, *The Princess Bride,* there are strong indications that children should never lose their innocence because it is a terrible endeavor which only leads to sorrow and death. When the fairy tale first begins, Buttercup and Westley are living on an idyllic farm where everything appears to run smoothly. Life has no apparent troubles beyond the necessary work to care for the farm. The daily riding of a horse is noted as a pleasurable experience and the horse comes to symbolize this period of peace where both Buttercup and Westley are living in a child-like simplicity. This picturesque and unspoiled life represents the ease and carefree time of innocence, where life is easy, simple and fun. It is important to understand the strong connection that has formed between childhood innocence and fairy tales. Primarily, the genre of fairy tale has come to be “identified with the spontaneous, innocent, [and] untutored mind” or in other words, “with children” because most fairy tales end in this happily ever after state (Sky 363). Thus, fairy tales leave children with a sense of pure hope that many adults are unable to believe in. It is during this fairy tale styled beginning that Buttercup and Westley first fall in love and partake of their true loves kiss. In most fairy tales, the true love’s kiss is a very powerful motif that can perform miracles such as waking a true love out of their deep sleep. This power is derived from the true love’s kiss’s ability to “guarantee” that the lovers “feelings are genuine and true” (Richardson 23). Therefore, this kiss symbolizes the love and bliss that they have discovered together in this time of untainted innocence.

However, unlike other fairy tales which culminate in a true love’s kiss, this movie begins at this moment. From here, Buttercup and Westley decide to leave behind the child-like state of innocence and progress into a more adult perspective of their love which is marriage. This is the moment when their troubles start as the innocence and beauty of their true love is disrupted by adult pursuits. Because marriage is a crucial stage of adulthood, this decision is a clear indication that Buttercup and Westley have started to ‘grow up’ and lose their innocence.

This fatal decision during the exposition is the initiator of the conflict for the rest of the story. It also reflects the awful truth about losing that child-like state: that it leads to unhappiness. Fairy tales are meant to be tales that are timeless, as revealed by the common saying of Once Upon a Time and, as such, usually do not depict characters that grow up during the narrative. This avoidance is most likely due to the fact that children are encouraged to remain innocent because most of the adult authors understand that there are “unappetizing aspects of aging” (Hume 57). First, Westley decides he must leave home in order to “seek his fortune” so that he can marry Buttercup. Although Westley believes this course of action a necessity in order to marry, all it does is separate the two lovers and bring them misery. In fact, the separation is nearly made permanent when Buttercup learns that Westley has been murdered. The narrator describes her misery: Buttercup retreated to solitude where she “neither ate nor slept”. She even claims, “I will never love again” which is a stark declaration of the sorrow that has emerged from Westley’s permanent absence. Because the life of their true love has been destroyed through Westley’s apparent death, the effervescent Buttercup loses her cheerful attitude and seems to die along with it. This destructive separation can also be seen in the director’s choice to film part of the scene looking in on Buttercup through the bars on her window, thus suggesting that by leaving and dying, Westley has subjected Buttercup to a perpetual captivity. She is no longer free to love and ride as she used to be.

In view of this lack of life and captivity she is compelled to marry Prince Humperdink. Because the law of the land allows Prince Humperdink to marry any woman in the land and Westley was no longer present to claim her hand, Buttercup has no choice but to accept the prince’s proposal. In a way, Buttercup’s marriage is a mirror of Wesley’s departure. In the time period where this movie takes place, Buttercup is unable to work to sustain herself. Instead, she must rely upon a man to provide for her. Thus, by marrying Prince Humperdink, Buttercup has secured for herself not just a marriage but also steady wealth. The wealth gained through her new engagement is apparent when she first appears to the people of Florin, dressed in a rich gown with extravagant jewels and standing upon a lush, red carpet. However, the narrator comments that despite all this wealth, “Buttercup’s emptiness consumed her” and she remained miserable. Both Wesley’s quest for wealth and Buttercup’s marriage represent life as an adult without innocence because these are common goals or ambitions of adults. Rather than just enjoying life, like they did on the farm, adults are driven in life by desires and needs that do not drive children. Therefore, it is revealed to the audience that these adult choices failed to bring about happiness or love. Instead, they brought separation, pain, and unhappiness.

Buttercup does attempt to return to the carefree, child-like time- like the one found on her farm- during her engagement to Prince Humperdink by riding her horse through the countryside. The narrator even claims that the “only joy she found was in her daily ride”. It was once said in 1795 by a man named Schiller, as quoted by Sky, that “[children] *are* what we *were*; they are what we should again *become*” (364). In a way, Buttercup has realized her mistake in leaving her child-like state of innocence and wishes to return. However, this daily ride is merely an echo of the life she lived before. Despite this momentary “joy” she is unable to return and attain the ease of the simple farm life. This is reflected through her abduction by three robbers, Inigo, Fezzik, and Vizinni during one of her daily outings. Thus, not only has Buttercup experienced the harsh realities of losing the child-like state but she is restrained and unable to return to the beautiful idyll she once knew without true love.

This reoccurring concept that growing up is terrible and should be avoided is continued when Wesley has returned to Florin alive and is held captive in Prince Humperdink’s torture chamber. Unlike most torture chambers, this torture chamber contains “the machine” which forces the subject to grow up by sucking the very life out of their body through suction cups. In this case, growing older and aging is the very opposite action of maintaining innocence. Prince Humperdink’s right hand man, Count Tyron Rugen, even comments that the machine took him “half a lifetime to invent”, just another reflection of its life-sucking ability. This man wasted his youth, what some consider the best years of life, on a monstrosity that can only harm others. In addition, this research has perverted his mind so that he has a “deep and dividing interest in pain”, revealing not only his antagonist nature but also how growing up and losing innocence corrupts human beings.

Furthermore, this machine is located in the “Pit of Despair” which is an apt description because its purpose does leave children with hopelessness. If children are forced to grow up they lose whatever hope in life they might have had and they become hardened by the pointless, driven adult life presented to them. Also, because the Pit of Despair is physically located below the earth inside a cave, it is suggested that the sucking of life and the early maturation is a decline from the normal. Thus the process is not just harmful but also a deterioration.

This machine also represents the ability of some children to grow up quickly or before their natural time, such as the grandson. In the same way, Westley who is subjected to the terrible power of this machine is forced to lose first one year of his life and then fifty within a few moments. By describing this action as torture it is clear that the accelerated or premature aging is disastrous for children. Not only does it pervert their minds, such as Count Tyron Rugen, but it also causes death. This is the result for Westley. However, Westley is only “mostly dead” and as Miracle Max claims, “there’s a big difference between mostly dead and all dead”. Children who either choose or have been forced to lose their innocence prematurely are mostly dead because although they may still live on the outside, living and breathing, they are dead on the inside. Too soon have they been subjected to the troubles and problems of the adult world and this murders the youthful, hopeful, believing quality that is instinctive to most children.

Furthermore, because “mostly dead” means that they are also “slightly alive”, there is still a small glimmer of hope for these children who leave their child-like state. When Miracle Max makes this statement, it is immediately obvious to the audience that in the same way that Westley has the chance to come back to life, there is still hope to reverse the damage caused by the sucking away of life in children, most importantly, the grandson. However, it is not at first clear what will restore life to those only slightly alive. Miracle Max and his wife, Valerie, supply Inigo and Fezzik with a miracle pill with chocolate coating which they are to give to Westley to revive him but as Inigo and Fezzik depart Valerie asks, “Think it’ll work?” To this, Miracle Max replies, “It would take a miracle”. This exchange leads me to believe that the “miracle pill” has no power to restore Westley to full life.

Instead, he needs a true miracle in the form of true love. There is a strong connection between the power of true love and the power of a true love’s kiss. In many ways, they are the same concept, that some all-powerful love will bring life back to the lifeless. Thus, what really saves Westley and brings him back from his prematurely aged dead is the true love he has with Buttercup. This power and might of true love to restore life is reflected in the words of Miracle Max who says that “true love is the greatest thing in the world”. It is the only force on earth strong enough to restore life.

Therefore, once Westley is once again in the pursuit to be reunited with Buttercup he slowly begins to come back to life in its entirety. This process is revealed in the way that first Westley can see and speak, then he can wiggle a finger, then shake his head, and so forth. The closer that Westley gets to Buttercup the more he is fully alive. Consequently, once Westley and Buttercup are reunited in freedom he becomes fully alive. The narrator claims that as Westley and his true love ride off into the night, “a wave of love swept over them”. Essentially, the wave of love erases all traces of their loss of innocence. It returns both Buttercup and Westley to their full, lively, child-like selves like they were at the beginning of the tale. This is reflected in many different ways in the movie. First, they ride off into the night on horses, the symbol of the joy that they both knew while living innocently on the farm. Although Buttercup was unable to experience that joy on her own while she believed Westley to be dead, once she is reunited with him in true love, she is able to fully partake of the pleasure alongside him. Secondly, they ride off on white horses. The color white generally symbolizes purity or innocence and by riding off on these white horses, it is suggested that Buttercup and Westley are returning to the innocence they experienced before they decided to get marry and leave the farm. Finally, Buttercup and Westley are shown to be returning to their original, lively selves by the true love’s kiss that is considered the “most passionate” and “most pure” of all true love’s kisses.

Although the journey back to innocence for Westley and Buttercup is figurative, it is a literal journey for the grandson. The grandson is similar to Westley when he is “mostly dead” and “slightly alive” because the grandson still has a chance to be restored. This glimmer of hope can be seen when the grandson immediately indicates his dislike of the “kissing book” and shows how youthful he truly is. Children of his age are often uncomfortable or dislike displays of affection such as kissing and prefer stories with action and adventure. This interruption of the tale is a clear indication that the grandson is not only of a young, innocent age but that a part of himself is still “slightly alive”.

Furthermore, the grandfather claims twice that this book is a “special” book as though the story itself is the remedy to the illness that the grandson is suffering from. By reading this book to his grandson, the grandfather is hoping to help his grandson heal and return to his true, innocent self. As when Westley is slowly healed by getting closer to Buttercup, the grandson is slowly healed as he grows to love the story and by the end he is fully restored. As first mentioned, the grandson completely dislikes the novel and sees it as a kissing book. His attitude toward the book can be heard in the way that he says, “I don’t believe this”. His tone is frustrated and contemptuous toward the book that his grandfather has so highly praised, clearly revealing how little he believes he will enjoy it. One of the next times the fairy tale is halted is when the grandfather deliberately inserts his own comment in order to comfort his grandson who he claims was looking “nervous” at the thought that Buttercup might get eaten by the eels. The grandson, still constrained by his attempt to behave like an adult rather than as a child first claims that he wasn’t nervous and then finally concedes that he was only “a little bit concerned”. Although the grandson tries to cover up his interest in the novel, the grandfather is very observant and is able to discern that his grandson is in fact becoming more engaged in the novel. In addition, the grandson’s transformation back toward an innocent child can be seen in how he still would like his grandfather to keep reading. As the grandfather originally believed, this novel is special. It is a fairy tale and it has hooked its audience in a way that they desire to keep reading.

The next interruption comes quite a bit later in the movie once Westley has been removed to the Pit of Despair and Buttercup is pledged to marry Prince Humperdink. At this time, the grandson has progressed so far back toward his full child-like state that he has become entirely invested in the story, claiming that his grandfather is “messing up the story” by reading that Buttercup marries Prince Humperdink. Unlike the casual, disinterested grandson who first consented to listen to the story, now he has become actively engaged in the story and if the kissing part of the story first revealed his true innocence, now the surety that Westley and Buttercup are meant to be together reveals the deeper healing. By the end of the novel, when Buttercup and Westley partake of their ultimate true love’s kiss, the grandson does not “mind so much” anymore at the “kissing” parts. This change in attitude reveals the transformation that has undergone in the grandson throughout the duration of the entire novel. It culminates in the restoration of his youthful, lively and curious child-like self.

In conclusion, *The Princess Bride* is an excellent example of the power that fairy tales possess to restore a child’s lost innocence. Not only is it enjoyable for children to read fairy tales but it is also necessary because it allows them to deal with their problems in a way that will be harmless to their youth and innocence. Therefore, this movie is loved for more than just its witty humor but more importantly because it teaches children and adults alike about the importance of being a child.

Works Cited

Agna, Mary. “Emphasis on Fairy Tales”. *Elementary English* 45.7 (1968): 952-954. *Jstore.* Web 6 Nov. 2014.

Bettelheim, Bruno. “The Struggle for Meaning”. *ENG 476 Studies in Folklore: The Fairy Tale* 376-391. Print.

Hume, Katherine. “Facing Life’s Limits in Robert Coover’s Recent Fiction”. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (2012): 57-70. *EBSCOHost.* WEB. 7 Nov. 2014.

*Princess Bride, The.* Dir. Rob Reiner. Perf. Cary Elwes, Mandy Patinkin, Chris Sarndon, Christopher Guest, Wallace Shawn, Andre the Giant and Robin Wright. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1987. DVD.

Richardson, Brianne Jayla. “Once Upon a Fairytale Romance”. *Texas State University- San Marcos* (2012): 1-32. Web. 6 Nov. 2014.

Sky, Jeanette. “Myths of Innocence and Imagination: The Case of the Fairy Tale”. *Literature & Theology* 16.4 (2002): 363-376. *EBSCOHost.* Web. 6 Nov. 2014.

Sweat, Rebecca. “Whatever Happened to Childhood?” *Social Issues.* Vision, Spring 2004. Web 07 Nov. 2014