Cinderella: The Significance and Timeless Nature of a Folkloric Costume Narrative

Despite the fact that the Cinderella fairytale has existed successfully throughout centuries of time, its survival has been contingent on the revisions and adaptations it has endured. This is apparent as each telling and subsequent retelling of this narrative carries distinct traces of significant cultural variation and/or societal modification, specifically relative to the four elements of folklore: custom, belief, material, and oral. However, despite the differences that each version of the narrative possesses, the integrity of the original narrative has not been compromised by the alterations it has undergone; rather its folkloric elements have been adjusted in isolation to make the story relevant or relatable to a given society or culture. The reasoning for such alterations is obvious as it allows the Cinderella fairytale to be “culturally and expressively communicative,” (McNeill 8) as material that is not meaningful, or illustrative or entertaining is leached out while the information thought to be especially important or relevant in a given population is carefully retained (8). Furthermore, given that “group consensus shapes folklore” (McNeill 8) and “a story becomes a narrative only when it is corporately agreed upon [by a community] and [therefore] no longer the product of an individual person” (Arnett and Arneson 7), it holds true that these alterations would be necessary for a folkloric narrative to be timeless and universally relevant.

However, how is it that such a malleable and adaptable narrative can also be universally relevant? This can be explicated through the connection between two specific sources. The first being the Cinderella film which was released in 2015, the most recent of over 300 different versions of Cinderella; and the second being a statement given by folklorist Lynne S. McNeill. “If [a story] is currently circulating it must be important…if it were completely superfluous,
[and] totally irrelevant to everyone’s lives, it would simply disappear” (34). Given that the Cinderella narrative has clearly persisted over the course of centuries in a variety of different cultures, ranging from ancient China to African oral tradition, with its latest version being released less than a year ago in the United States, it is logical to assume that this fairytale possesses an element of importance which has been noted by each of the cultures that have perpetuated it throughout the course of history, even with the alteration of specific folkloric elements. Most importantly, given that the central narrative elements of the original have persisted in each version of Cinderella, it is obvious that it is not the folkloric aspects of the narrative which are considered to be important, but rather, those central narrative elements which are copied almost perfectly in each subsequent version.

Thus, my explanation, and subsequently my argument, is twofold. First, I assert that Cinderella depicts specific narrative elements – such as a desire and hope for love and acceptance, a striving for a bettered standard of living, and ultimately the triumph of good over evil – which can be understood and appreciated on a universal level. As a result, I furthermore assert that, due to its empathetic elements, Cinderella functions as a costume narrative; or in other words, a story whose plot is not deeply rooted in a particular time period, cultural setting, or necessitating specific cultural elements to be present; therefore allowing it to be versatile in its telling, being free to traverse all manner of cultural and societal circumstances with only slight variation to the original narrative.

Since the exploration of these assertions largely depends upon the examination of the cultural and societal modifications which exist in various tellings of Cinderella and the successive impact they have had on a given culture’s acceptance of the fairytale, it is first important to note the key aspects of the original tale. Though it has been speculated that the
earliest versions “may have originated in ancient China or Egypt” due to similarities between certain marital customs in each society and the relevance of the glass/gold/leather slipper to the story (Zipes 313), the first well-known and widely accepted versions of Cinderella were recorded in early European literary tradition; most notably by Charles Perrault and his son, Pierre, in 1697.

The “original” European fairytale begins with a mother’s promise to her only daughter that she will look after her from beyond the grave as she dies. This is quickly followed by the young girl’s father’s search for a new wife. Once the page is turned, we come to realize that he has chosen to marry a monstrous woman with two nasty daughters from a previous marriage. Once this step-mother and her daughters move into the house, they begin to mistreat the young girl by forcing her out of her room and into the cellar where she is compelled to act as a servant - doing the meanest work in the house, for the three of them. She helps them to dress, she cooks and she cleans. However, as is expected of a girl with her character, Cinderella bears the treatment well, refusing to complain to even her own father. Instead, she seeks refuge in the ashes and soot of the fireplace after finishing her cleaning to avoid the scolding and cruelty from her step-mother and step-sisters. The trouble is, by doing so, she unknowingly provides them with the opportunity to call her names, ranging from “Cinderwench” to “Cinderella.” Of course we know that it was the latter which eventually stuck, as it is the name “Cinderella” which we still use both in reference to her character and all of the stories which resemble the original fairytale.

The story then closely follows the model which we are familiar with today. Cinderella dresses her step-sisters in extravagant clothing and politely asks if she can accompany them to the ball at the prince’s castle. Since she has miraculously completed the impossible task given
her to keep her from attending, her step-sisters destroy the dress she is wearing – a gown of her mother’s - and mock her mercilessly for attempting to copy their extravagance in order to keep her from going. Cinderella then flees to the garden, weeping hysterically as her step-sisters depart for the castle. Moments later, a fairy godmother appears, plump and cheerful, and dresses Cinderella even more magnificently than her step-sisters and sends her to the ball on three consecutive nights, warning her each time to return before the spell wears off at midnight. On the second night, in her effort to heed her fairy godmother’s warning, Cinderella loses one of her glass slippers which is collected by the prince, longingly pursuing her as she flees from the palace. Then, being so enraptured with her beauty, the prince scours the kingdom for Cinderella with the intent to marry her. And finally, after having tried the shoe on numerous women throughout the kingdom, the slipper finally fits Cinderella’s foot and they are married (Lang).

Now to return to the original assertions made above. In order to effectively call the original Cinderella narrative a costume narrative, it is important to note the elements which render it universally relatable and understood and therefore capable of being a costume narrative. For example, one of the primary aspects of the Cinderella story which is both universally understood and often empathized with, is that of overcoming tremendous adversity – particularly regarding difficult family situations – in order to achieve love and acceptance. Mary Kenny, in her article regarding our adoration for the Cinderella fairytale, explained that “we love the idea of a person who has been ignored and humiliated overcoming adversity and winning her rightful place in the world - and in love” (Kenny). She furthermore explicates – by way of citing Betteleim – that another valuable lesson exists in this story which is both true and widely appreciated. “[T]hat life will bring adversity, and there will be struggles… that life [isn’t] just about pleasure, reward and comfort” (Kelly). While it is not always the case that children will
grow up in a home where they are unloved and unwanted and therefore treated as servants the way Cinderella was; it is not unreasonable to assume that at some point in their life each person will yearn for a form of love or acceptance or even success that they have not yet achieved.

According to Alison Lapper, this yearning, “to love and be loved [is] instinctive…these feelings…make us human” (Lapper). Thus, the desire to have love is something that each of us can understand to some extent, regardless of time or cultural barriers. As a result, it is not far-fetched to assume that Cinderella’s cultural fluidity is largely dependent upon this universal element. What’s more, this theme exists in each version of the Cinderella tale as a central catalyst to the propulsion of the story. As a narrative element “overcoming adversity to achieve love” is not dependent on time or place and as a result allows the story to exist in its various locales and cultures while maintaining its integrity and potency.

Another narrative element which greatly facilitates the fluidity of the Cinderella fairytale is the universal theme of the triumph of good over evil. It can be seen in narratives of all sorts, ranging from biblical narratives like Job to contemporary dystopian novels like the Hunger Games (Collins); and while this aspect of Cinderella is often given religious undertones (Callahan), it is a component that can be observed in most literary disciplines in one form or another. It permeates the lives of children by way of Disney films and picture books, the lives of teenagers through young adult novels and popular films and the lives of adults through impactful world events and personal experience; with some cross-over between age groups. In fact, Anna Aragno explained that, “The polarization of our nature into “good and bad” and the anthropomorphic externalizations of these impulsions have been with us for millennia, providing inspiration for magical rites, representational forms, and the cornucopia of dramas, narratives, and artworks to which they give expression” (249). Furthermore, she explicates that “of all the
great dualities of human experience, “good and evil” have been the most instrumental in shaping the beliefs, rituals, and laws of [human populations] as [we’ve] evolved from small groups to swell into our modern civilization” (250). This remains true today. Between Shakespeare’s Macbeth in the 16th century (253-254), the biblical account of Satan’s fall from grace (252), and the native human instincts and behaviors discussed by St. Augustine (252), etc. narratives focused on the battle between “good and evil” have always existed. Cinderella is no exception. What’s more, as aforementioned by Aragno, these “good vs. evil” narratives have become such integral components of our understanding and interpretation of our world that we have perpetuated them from century to century and civilization to civilization. Their importance to human populations have never diminished. Likewise, the triumph of good over evil has acted in this way within the Cinderella narrative – changing nothing of its central integrity but rather creating a bridge over which it traveled from dynasty to village to Hollywood, all the while never ceasing in popularity.

Therefore, given the aforementioned universally valued narrative elements it possesses, Cinderella effectively functions as a costume narrative piece; meaning that instead of being relevant only and therefore rooted firmly in a specific time period or culture, the story is versatile, relying primarily on its key elements to successfully adapt to incorporate different cultural needs without compromising the integrity of the original narrative. This is evident as Cinderella has existed effectively in hundreds of different forms, each with their own distinct cultural variation. For instance, by examining Disney’s classic 1950 retelling of Cinderella, one would find that while the musical numbers and docile female behavior present in the film were characteristic of 1950’s American pop culture, the skeletal structure found in Perrault’s “original” fairytale remained intact (Wood 26). Cinderella was still mistreated by her new
stepmother and sisters, still sleeping in the servants’ quarters and acting as the only servant in the house, still denied the opportunity to go to the royal ball that her stepsisters were attending by her stepmother, still secretly granted the opportunity to go to the ball by the magic of her fairy godmother and still playing a key role in the glass slipper search which results in the triumph of good over evil as Cinderella is ultimately able to surmount her adversity to find love and acceptance.

This is interesting, as the same Cinderella, with only slight cultural adaptations, also managed to exist successfully in the Chinese culture, seemingly as early as 9th century. Granted, the young girl, customarily named Yeh-shen, wished to attend a Chinese festival instead of the traditional ball that is familiar to western culture, particularly in modern retellings; but the fact that she was granted her wish to attend on three consecutive days and dressed in beautiful clothing to do so is all too familiar to all those who are familiar with the fairytale (Louie). Likewise, one of many African versions of Cinderella, commonly knowns as Chinye: A West African Folk Tale, accomplishes the same task: shifting costume elements (location, clothing, tradition, language and names, etc.) while successfully maintaining its central integrity. This can be seen as this version of the narrative focuses on the journey that Chinye embarks on as she traverses the forest to collect water, and ultimately ends up marrying the chief. Again, note that while costume elements have been altered to fit certain African cultures, the key elements of the narrative still act as its driving force and as the ultimate point of the story: namely, the focus of the reward a kind but maltreated daughter receives for her good actions compared with the consequences her nasty sister’s bad choices yield for her (Onyefulu). This same model is observed in countless other editions of the fairytale: Domitila: A Cinderella Tale from the Mexican Tradition (Coburn), Cendrillon: A Caribbean Cinderella (San Souci), The Golden
Slipper: A Vietnamese Legend (Lum), Raisel’s Riddle (Silverman), etc. Regardless, though each version may not possess the magical horse drawn carriages characteristic of Disney’s 1950 version or the magical talking fish which serves as a key component of the 9th century Chinese version, the key features at the heart of the fairytale, which affect its identification, have always remained constant.

In addition to extensive cultural variations which Cinderella has undergone over the course of the past several centuries, this fairytale has also been successful in maintaining its core elements as it has passed from society to society over revolutionizing decades, even with the advent of unique sets of rules and social expectations. Specifically, when comparing modern tellings with early versions of the fairytale, one would note significant alterations in the depiction of Cinderella’s nature. For example, regardless of location, each early version of the fairytale depicted the character of Cinderella as a kind and docile girl; which fit harmoniously with the societal expectations for women and girls of the time, as, during the 15th century, women were expected to only fulfill the roles of wife, mother and keeper of the home, while remaining subordinate to men in the traditional social hierarchy. There was even a perpetuated belief that women must “keep silent” while in public presence of men (Whitford 179). Naomi Wood in her article Domesticating Dreams in Walt Disney’s Cinderella, explained that this same idea for female behavior persisted into the 20th century, as, the same way “Charles Perrault sought ‘to reinforce the standards of the civilizing process’…in his 1697 collection of fairy tales, Disney too [civilized] by entertaining—presenting examples of ideal types modeling proper behavior and comic anti-types showing us the results of improper behavior” (26). Therefore causing Cinderella’s behavior in the classic retelling to mirror that of the 15th century telling. This idea becomes clearly apparent when examining Walt Disney’s 1950 version of Cinderella as
Cinderella acts as the archetype of acceptable behavior – making her bed without being asked, speaking softly, and treating all animals kindly – thereby receiving the reward that comes with “ideal” behavior: marriage to a rich man and the ultimate reception of love and acceptance, and her step-sisters act as the anti-type, and therefore receive no reward.

This societal determination changed as time progressed, most noticeably rearing its head in the 1990’s. Then, both the nature of the Cinderella character and the roles and expectations for female behavior changed dramatically. One example lies in the 1998 cinematic retelling, *Ever After*, where the central character, Ella, behaves as an outspoken and strong-willed female character. This can be seen through the hero’s journey which she embarks on in order to rid herself and those around her of the inequality which they are forced to endure. This version of the *Cinderella* fairytale makes sense as, during this time period – the 1980’s and 90’s in western culture, specifically American culture – the third wave of feminism was in full swing. As a result, women across the country were acting as and looking for examples of “capable, strong, and assertive social agents” who “[engaged] in a new, more self-assertive—even aggressive—but also [a] more playful and less pompous kind of feminism” (Krolokke 15). Thus, under these societal constraints, in order for the retelling to be relevant and relatable, it was obviously necessary for a film studio to conform to the social and societal expectations for women. Here again, this doesn’t equate to the integrity of the story being compromised to fit societal needs, but rather simple adjustments being made to reach the intended audience while maintaining the integrity of the original fairytale and its essential characteristics.

Functionally, it is understandable that this fairytale would need to undergo cultural or societal variation in order to make the narrative relevant and relatable to a given population, but the fact that the fundamental story has remained intact after centuries is a phenomena that is
largely not understood. I suppose the best way to summarize it is to say that this fairytale is one that will never go away. It has become deeply rooted in our 21st century American culture through film production and narrative adaptations. It has moved seamlessly across time by perpetuating and highlighting valuable human hopes and beliefs which largely determine our understanding and interpretation of the world we live in. It has given us the ability to relate to one another and to empathize with a young girl who ultimately overcomes her circumstances to achieve love and acceptance and reminds us again of our belief that good will ultimately triumph over evil as we struggle to succeed in an ever darkening world. The question now then is: where will this fairytale go next?
Works Cited


