Once Upon a Time in a Single-Parent Family: Father and Daughter Relationships in Disney's The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast

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ONCE UPON A TIME IN A SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY: FATHER AND DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN DISNEY’S THE LITTLE MERMAID AND BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

by

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ABSTRACT

ONCE UPON A TIME IN A SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY: FATHER AND DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN DISNEY’S *THE LITTLE MERMAID* AND *BEAUTY AND THE BEAST*

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Fairy tales are adapted to fit the needs of each generation, reflecting the unique challenges of that society. In the 1980s and 1990s of the United States, issues of what constituted a family circulated as divorce increased and fatherhood was debated. At this time, Disney released two animated films featuring a father and daughter: *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Both films are adaptations of fairy tales, and they incorporate changes that specifically reflect concerns of the United States in the late-twentieth century.

In the original narrative of “The Little Mermaid,” the heroine is primarily raised by her grandmother and wants an immortal soul more than the love of the prince. The tale ends with her death and expectation that after 300 years of service, she can obtain an immortal soul. Disney changes the story, however, by removing the grandmother and
placing Triton at the head of the family. His overbearing nature pushes Ariel away as she struggles to gain her independence and win Eric’s love. Before the story concludes, Triton, Ariel, and Eric work together to defeat the sea witch and achieve the film’s happy ending—the creation of a traditional family.

The fairy tale of “Beauty and the Beast” begins with a father who is educated, respected, and wealthy before hardship strikes. Beauty’s request for a rose is what starts the adventure as she must learn to love the Beast to save him from an enchanted curse. Disney’s alterations to the narrative make Maurice an ineffectual father whose inadequacies bring Belle to the Beast’s castle, and the modified curse on the Beast makes both him and Belle need to fall in love, founding their relationship on equality. The tale concludes with the jubilant hope that the couple will form a family together.

Both animated features proved popular with the public, suggesting that the films’ resolutions are considered desirable endings. The films can then be interpreted as expressing the hope that from the single-parent homes of the late-twentieth century, a new generation of stronger nuclear families can arise if these homes base their relationships on unified efforts and equal partnerships.
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Chapter One:

Thesis Objectives and the History of Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are more than just entertaining stories for children; at their heart, they express the concerns of society, the trials and traumas of maturity, and the best and worst of life experience. They tell people “what they unconsciously know—that human nature is not innately good, that conflict is real, that life is harsh before it is happy—and thereby reassure them about their own fears and their own sense of self” (Arthur M. Schlesinger 64). Such notions are woven into stories of magic and mystery that enchant children of all ages and elicit requests for more. Sleepy-eyed boys and girls beg to hear these tales as they are tucked into bed, and adults delight in discovering retellings of their old favorites.

Fairy tales, along with myths and legends, are considered part of folklore, which comes out of the oral storytelling tradition. Let me state clearly that fairy tales do not have to contain fairies; that distinction is too narrow. J. R. R. Tolkien explained that this genre deals not with fairies per se but the realm of Faërie. “Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted” (14). This means fairy tales are similar to our world but include an element beyond, a facet of magic that may be as grand as a powerful witch or as simple as a kiss of true love. This also makes it difficult to pin a straightforward definition to such a broad range of topics, but fairy tales can be described as fanciful stories containing elements of magic, extraordinary deeds, and legendary creatures.
The term “fairy tale” comes from the English translation of “conte de fée” which was coined in the seventeenth century by French writers. This label became so popular that it has persisted to the present day, applying itself to other types of similar stories such as the narratives by Hans Christian Andersen which extend the genre by “focusing on human behavior, on virtues and vices, and on compassion and repentance” (Tatar, *Annotated* 338). That this genre is not rigid but grows to include new elements is part of its innate character, as it changes to fit the needs of new generations.

Fairy tales serve a greater purpose than merely being entertaining stories. Maria Tatar asserts in *The Classic Fairy Tales* that

> the staying power of these stories, their widespread and enduring popularity, suggests that they must be addressing issues that have a significant social function—whether critical, conservative, compensatory, or therapeutic...Fairy tales register an effort on the part of both women and men to develop maps for coping with personal anxieties, family conflicts, social frictions, and the myriad frustrations of everyday life. (xi)

If these stories did not possess some remarkable qualities, they would not have survived for centuries nor become as popular as they are today.

It is this pervasive quality of fairy tales throughout the ages that signify their enduring attraction and immense importance as they expose concerns and alleviate fears. They permeate societies and elicit a curiosity for what these narratives have to say about the communities that produce and maintain them. Many scholars have searched these stories to ascertain the answers; however, each generation adapts the tales to mirror its unique hopes and fears. Thus, when considering the social issues of a particular time and
place, one can begin to recognize the unique ways in which the narratives are altered.
The relation between these two aspects can then be interpreted, offering a commentary on what these modified tales say about the anxieties and aspirations of that society.

Thesis Objectives and Chapter Outline

Recognizing that fairy tales are transformed to fit the particular needs of each society, I looked to the overwhelming popularity of Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1991). The studio\(^1\) had faltered for decades after the death of Walt Disney in 1966, and the appearance of these two animated films marked its successful return as a leader in family entertainment.\(^2\) There are, of course, many variables that can contribute to a product’s achievement, but one significant component in this case seems to be Disney’s recognition of the changes in American family life at the time. Divorce was on the rise and single-parent families were increasing at alarming rates. The alterations Disney made to *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* thereby created adaptations of the fairy tales that connected personally with many of its viewers. This is significant as it reflects the concerns and hopes of late-twentieth-century Americans. Traditional families were disintegrating and fears were rising that few nuclear families would survive. This was causing devastating effects on children, adults,

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\(^1\) I will generally refer to The Walt Disney Company as “Disney” throughout this thesis. I do so for the sake of simplicity, but it should be noted that Disney’s films are created by a collection of people, including writers, animators, musicians, actors, and directors. The corporation itself is divided into separate operating units for areas such as amusement parks and consumer products. The Walt Disney Studios is the unit over theatrical films, home videos, and music records.

\(^2\) As a provider of family entertainment, Disney tends to be more conservative and positive in its representations of families. For example, even when a father is depicted as neglecting his children, it is made clear that he loves them and by the end of the story he has learned to be more attentive. For this study, Disney can also be considered family entertainment in the sense that their animated features reach a mixed audience of children, adolescents, and adults, with each age group simultaneously being able to enjoy the film.
and society, as many saw the emerging negativities as being linked to changing family structures. Children suffered emotionally, physically, and socially; adults hesitated to marry and face a possible divorce later; and society struggled to control rising violence and declining academic achievement. Disney’s two films, however, offer hope at this troubling time. From the single-parent homes headed by Triton and Maurice, Ariel and Belle emerge to face life’s difficulties and create a new generation of families. Disney’s resolution for these films was the formation of a nuclear family, and the American public eagerly embraced the tales.

To examine this association between the issues of the late-twentieth century and Disney’s two films, it is necessary to first recognize that fairy tales have been adapted to fit the needs of different societies throughout the ages. This look at the history of the genre will lay a critical foundation for this study that demonstrates the malleability of fairy tales to be adjusted to the unique concerns of each culture that employs them. The following chapter will build upon this by discussing Disney’s place in the genre and the frequent presence of single-parent families in fairy tales, with particular focus on the escalating divorce rates of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s.

Once aware of the rise in divorce, Disney’s two films can be examined from the perspective of single-parent families. In *The Little Mermaid*, Disney’s changes to the original tale put an overbearing father at the forefront of the heroine’s journey as she struggles to gain independence from him and find her place in a new world, thereby

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3 While some critics would disagree that the dissolution of nuclear families is a major cause behind society’s woes, I have found compelling data that suggests otherwise and have cited it throughout this study.

4 The idea is that single-parent homes do not have the benefit of two parents to care for the children and share the responsibilities, while two-parent families offer the complimentary approaches of mothers and fathers and give spouses mutual support.
creating friction as the daughter resists her father’s harsh parenting and strives to be regarded as an adult. For *Beauty and the Beast*, a different dynamic is created when the fairy tale’s family is condensed to just one daughter and an ineffectual father. Now the heroine’s adventure is the result of her father’s inadequacies, and she must endure what comes before she can develop a lasting relationship with the Beast and subsequently move from a home where she is the caretaker to one where each person mutually attends to the other.

After individual examinations of the films, a final chapter will consider the broader changes experienced by families in the United States. Narrowing in on issues of fatherhood and masculinity, the change in father types between Disney’s two animated features will be linked to shifting views in the United States, interpreting Triton as a muscularly-robust breadwinner and Maurice as an unemployed, more sensitive father. The synthesis of this information with Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* will reaffirm the significance of these two tales in American culture in the late-twentieth century as they pertain to society’s challenges with changing family structures and its hopes for building a brighter future of stronger, more-lasting families.

While the scrutiny I will be employing during my investigations may not state it, I do not wish my study in fairy tales to deprive these stories of their triumphant nature and essential optimism. Indeed, it is their hope and cheer that drew me to them in the first place and gave me the courage to enter the adult world so often plagued by figurative monsters. In this way, I adopt Marina Warner’s sentiments on examining fairy tales.

Charting the circumstances of their making and remaking, analyzing the politics and history embedded in the tales, does not mean trampling, I
hope, on the sheer exuberance of their entertainment, or crushing the transcendent pleasures they so often give. For these are stories with staying power, as their antiquity shows, because the meanings they generate are themselves magical shape-shifters, dancing to the needs of their audience. (xix-xx)

It is their inherent magical power that makes a study of fairy tales so insightful and valuable, and the following chapters will serve to reiterate this view. For now, I will begin by discussing the audiences that benefit from the intrinsic power of fairy tales: children, adolescents, and adults.

**Audiences of the Fairy Tale**

In today’s society, children are raised on fairy tales. Girls twirl around in princess costumes and lose a glass slipper or two, while boys climb imaginary beanstalks and outthink giants. Indeed, these stories can infiltrate nearly every hour of their day: they act them out in the morning, watch them on television or video in the afternoon, and hear them at bedtime. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim wondered why kids found “fairy tales more satisfying than all other children’s stories” (6). He explored this significance in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*.

I realized that these tales, in a much deeper sense than any other reading material, start where the child really is in his psychological and emotional being. They speak about his severe inner pressures in a way that the child unconsciously understands, and—without belittling the most serious inner
struggles which growing up entails—offer examples of both temporary
and permanent solutions to pressing difficulties. (6)

These stories offer hope and strength for children—hope in the future and strength to
prevail over its hardships.

Adolescence is another likely age to revisit fairy tales. These stories are scattered
across the shelves of video and bookstores in the forms of *Into the Woods* (1991), *Ever
After* (1998), *A Cinderella Story* (2004), *The Brothers Grimm* (2005), and teen books like
*Tam Lin* (1992), *East* (2003), *Beast* (2004), and the series *Once Upon a Time* (2002-
present).\(^5\) At this maturing age, two key events are experienced by adolescents:
behavioral division with authority and the hormonal changes of puberty. Likewise, the
first step in many fairy tales is for the protagonist to separate from his or her anxious
parents who are uneasy with their child’s sexual awakening. Often, a darkness lurks to
impede—or compel—the developments of the protagonist from dependence to
independence. Along the way, a life-long love is found and ultimately secured. In *Once
Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, Max Lüthi used the story of Rapunzel as an
example of how fairy tales can be utilized to represent the maturation process:

The development takes place in several stages, and each transition
involves danger, privation, and fear. But the dangers are overcome, and
the development leads to the light…Thus, the old is cast off and the new,
which at first appeared so terrifying to us, becomes familiar, develops new
capabilities and powers within us, and makes life meaningful. (112-13)

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\(^5\) The adaptation and production of fairy tales for teens appears to be a booming market, and the
examples listed above are just a few examples.
In a very real sense, adolescents can relate to this progression towards adulthood which is frequently expressed in fairy tales; they find therein the comfort that survival and achievement of maturation are possible.

Being an adult does not make fairy tales irrelevant to one’s life. Any type of compelling literature has a way of teaching its readers new ways of thinking and seeing the world when revisited, and fairy tales offer this insight and reveal new meanings for adults. As Bettelheim explains, fairy tales possess “overt and covert meanings,” allowing them to “speak simultaneously to all levels of the human personality, communicating in a manner which reaches the uneducated mind of the child as well as that of the sophisticated adult” (5-6). Jack Zipes gives his opinion on some of the knowledge an adult can gain from these stories in his book *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. “[T]here will always be hope that folk and fairy tales may provide counsel and moral learning to expose the crazed drive for power that many individual politicians, corporate leaders, governments, church leaders, and petty tyrants evince and to pierce the hypocrisy of their moral stances” (x). Illustrative examples include the satire offered in *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* (1994) and *Legally Correct Fairy Tales* (1996) or the feminist revisions found in *Don’t Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England* (1986). Certainly, the audiences of such pointed, if humorous, attacks on society would require an advanced awareness, one that would limit children from fully grasping the meaning behind the stories.

It seems fairy tales are important for all age groups—it is only a matter of what each level receives that differs. Children subconsciously ascertain ways to endure an
uncertain future; adolescents learn how to develop into maturing individuals; and adults discover more complex insights into the perils and foolishness of society. For the two films of this study, it means the different age levels within their mixed audiences are each gaining something important, whether it be that they can endure the hazards of life, the hardships of maturity, or the ills of society. The fact that fairy tales can be rewritten to provide such diverse results is part of the nature of the genre, and a key to why Disney’s interpretations of *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* are byproducts of the time and issues of when they were produced. To better understand this malleable nature in fairy tales, a look at the genre’s history is valuable to understanding its current state.

**History of the Fairy Tale**

Fairy tales did not begin with the Grimm Brothers. Misconceptions like this make it necessary to discuss the evolution of fairy tales through the ages. Moreover, tracing their history will also show how the stories are modified with each retelling to reflect the hopes, anxieties, and challenges of each age. This has occurred for centuries. Zipes covers the development of these tales in a number of his books: *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry*; *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*; and *Spells of Enchantment: The Wondrous Fairy Tales of Western Culture*. In their earliest form, they were oral folk tales; this simply means they were verbally-transmitted stories for distinct communities. In this tradition, “small groups of people interacted with a storyteller, generally a member of the group, who responded to their needs and demands…representing their belief systems and tastes in a voice or voices with which they identified” (*Happily* 3). Furthermore, “[e]ach historical
epoch and each community altered the original folk tales according to its needs as they were handed down over the centuries” (Breaking 8). Many of these early narratives reflected an anxiety of natural forces and the hopes of overcoming or surviving those forces. The tales were not written down at the time, so it is difficult—if not impossible—to identify the very first existence of these stories. We do know, however, that they “made their way into the Bible and the Greek classics such as The Iliad and The Odyssey” (Spells xii). In this way, Odysseus’s tragic journey home, which is driven by the anger of the god Poseidon, could represent a very real fear of stormy weather deterring travelers at sea.

The first major literary fairy tale emerged in the second century when “Cupid and Psyche” appeared in the Latin narrative romance Metamorphoses (also called The Golden Ass) by Apuleius. Zipes describes the importance of this singular story.

[W]hereas many oral wonder tales had been concerned with the humanization of natural forces, the literary fairy tale, beginning with “Cupid and Psyche,” shifted the emphasis more toward the civilization of the protagonist, who must learn to respect particular codes and laws to become accepted in society and/or united to reproduce and continue the progress of the world toward perfect happiness. (Spells xvi)

This is an important change in the genre’s focus, and it can still be identified in the fairy tales of modern day. Disney’s The Little Mermaid, for instance, is not really about the

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6 In this tale, Psyche is praised for her great beauty. Resentful of this adoration, Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, sends her son, Cupid, to make the young woman fall in love with the vilest creature; however, Cupid falls in love with her instead. Eventually, Psyche is whisked away to a grand palace where a man visits her bed every night but commands she never look upon him. Through a course of events, she eventually disobeys and the mysterious lover is revealed as Cupid, who immediately leaves her for being distrustful. Heartbroken, Psyche goes to Venus for help. Still angry with the girl, the goddess assigns Psyche four difficult tasks. Ultimately, Cupid forgives Psyche, rescues her, and secures her immortality beside him.
power of the mer-king over the sea but about the struggles of his daughter to obey his rules and find her own place in the world. For antiquity and the middle ages, this change in focus was for predominately male audiences as it educated them in the moral values necessary to achieve status in their community. This persisted for the next thousand years, and it “was not until the publication of Giovanni Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (The Delectable Nights) in 1550-53 that fairy tales were first published in the vernacular and for a mixed audience of (upper-class) men and women” (*Spells* xvii).

In Europe, the literary fairy tale first prospered in Italy, but it was in France from 1600 to 1714 where it really thrived and eventually left its mark on the genre. Its popularity at court and in salons led to its publication by writers such as Marie-Catherine D’Aulnoy and Charles Perrault and to stories like “Puss in Boots” and “Cinderella.” With the translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1704-17) from the Arabian tradition, “the literary fairy tale became an acceptable social symbolic form through which conventionalized motifs, characters, and plots were selected, composed, arranged, and rearranged to comment on the civilizing process and to keep alive the possibility of miraculous change and a sense of wonderment” (*Spells* xx). When Antoine Galland translated *The Thousand and One Nights*, he changed parts to reflect French culture. Perhaps he felt adjustments were needed to make the narrative connect with its new audience, just like the oral storytellers of the past adapted their stories to be immediately applicable to their native listeners. This inclination has persisted to present today, and it is why these tales are available in so many versions, each one presenting the unique interests of its originally intended audience.
It is during this time in the genre’s development that the French writers coined the term *conte de fée*, its anglicized translation being *fairy tale*, “and it has stuck to the genre in Europe and North America ever since” (*Spells* xx). This label accurately reveals the fantastical element in these stories as they depict a “miraculous power…not associated with a particular religion or mythology” (*Spells* xx). Zipes suggests “the gifted French women writers of the seventeenth century preferred to address themselves to a fairy and to have a fairy resolve the conflicts in their tales rather than the Church, with its male-dominated hierarchy” (*Spells* xx). This again reflects a current concern of the society being manifest within the genre, and it is interesting to see how this concept is adjusted in Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*. The original tale has a fairy whose appearances move the story along and return the Beast to human form, but Disney’s film limits her role to just the opening sequence as she places a curse upon the Beast. Now, it is the power of love alone that liberates the prince from his monstrous enchantment and brings the story its happy ending, thereby reflecting a greater interest in the potency of love than in the magic of a fairy.

During the seventeenth century, peddlers began to circulate fairy tales through central Europe in the form of chapbooks (small books or pamphlets), and this is when the genre started to be cultivated for children. Zipes states that after 1730, “it became more acceptable to write and publish fairy tales for children just so long as they indoctrinated gender-specific roles and class codes” (*Spells* xxi). *Magasin des Enfants* (1743) by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont is such an example. Within a framework of a governess teaching young girls through didactic stories, an abbreviated version of “Beauty and the Beast” appeared. This style of instructing children was adaptable to
upper-class homes with nannies and governesses and was carried into the following centuries through mothers sharing the tales with their children at bedtime.

Of course, fairy tales served varying purposes according to the objectives of the authors: propaganda, social critique, didacticism, entertainment, or self-parody (Spells xxii). And it really was not until the 1820s that fairy tales were wholly deemed appropriate for children and were able to separate from previously-held fears that they contained unhealthy elements. “The more tolerant acceptance of the literary fairy tale for children may be attributed to the realization on the part of educators and parents, probably owing to their own reading experience, that fantasy literature and amusement would not necessarily destroy or pervert children’s minds” (Spells xxiv). From a present-day perspective, it is valuable to note that the audience of fairy tales has changed over the centuries. Once geared towards the entire community, the genre later became primarily for adults until its subsequent categorization as children’s literature. In the last few decades it has undergone another change, and its audience has grown to incorporate all age levels. While some of its versions are intended for specific ages, others embrace mixed audiences, such as Disney’s animated features.

It is during the time when fairy tales were becoming acceptable for children that the Grimm Brothers emerged with their studies in language and folklore. From 1812 to 1857, Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm published seven editions of Die Kinder- und Hausmärchen (Children's and Household Tales) with its final version containing over 200 stories. The tales they collected “contained many primeval motifs but essentially reflected late feudal conditions in their aesthetic composition and symbolic referential system” (Breaking 8). “The initial ontological situations in the tales generally deal with
exploitation, hunger and injustice familiar to the lower classes in pre-capitalist societies. And the magic of the tales can be equated to the wish-fulfillment and utopian projections of the people, i.e., of the folk, who preserved and cultivated these tales” (Breaking 8). In this way, the fairy tales they published served to show the anxieties and aspirations of the time. For *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, the alterations made to the stories show the struggles of single fathers and their daughters with the happy solution at the end being the creation of a new two-parent family.

Besides the work of the Grimm Brothers, the rise of the middle class from 1830 to 1900 also contributed to the popularity of fairy tales for children. Hans Christian Andersen emerged during this time as he wrote mostly original stories, garnering the title as the father of the modern fairy tale. He combined “humor, Christian sentiments, and fantastic plots to form tales that at once amused and instructed both young and older readers” (Spells xxiv). However, by the 1850s, subversive fairy tales began to appear, questioning the value systems they had previously been used to uphold. “Bluebeard’s Ghost” (1843) by William Makepeace Thackeray and *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll are two examples of this new style.

Literature, however, was not the only medium that generated fairy tales. Long before the twentieth century, the genre “had expanded to include drama, poetry, ballet, music, and opera” (Spells xxvi). *The Magic Flute* (1791) by Mozart, and *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1881) by Offenbach, and *Sleeping Beauty* (1889) by Tchaikovsky are just three examples, demonstrating the genre’s malleability to different art forms. This extension beyond the literary medium was again furthered with the advent of film during the next century. As Annalee Ward explains, “Storytelling is vital to every society as a
Today, popular film has become a central storyteller for contemporary culture” (1). For fairy tales, that meant the appearance of such motion pictures as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *La Belle et la Bête* (1946).

Keeping with their inherent and malleable nature, fairy tales transformed again to reflect the concerns of the twentieth century. As civil and world wars raged across the globe, fairy tales became a vehicle for political sentiments, whether supporting war efforts or exposing the horrors of combat. In the 1960s, feminism questioned and reversed the traditional gender roles in these stories, empowering female characters to save themselves from demise rather than waiting to be rescued by a handsome prince. With the growth of commercialism and advancements in animation and filmmaking, movie theaters and home televisions offered even more ways to reach an audience. These new developments are still important factors in today’s fairy tales. For example, feminist issues appear in Shannon Hale’s retelling of *The Goose Girl* (2003) as the heroine is no longer tricked into revealing her true identity as a princess but now must face the king and death in an effort to reclaim her crown. Similarly, one reason films like *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* remain popular even a decade or two after their release is because they are of continued social relevance, reflecting concerns that are still important to society.

At a time when film was still a relatively new medium, Disney took advantage of the delight and interest fairy tales offered viewers and emerged as one of its most recognized providers. In recent years, it has been criticized for its “saccharine sexist and illusionary stereotypes” (*Spells* xxvii). For example, Sheng-mei Ma denigrates Disney’s
portrayal of supposedly different cultural women in her article found in *The Emperor’s Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney’s Magic Kingdom*. She says “Disney’s nineties characters, despite their divergent racial backgrounds, exhibit an amazing degree of similarity physically and temperamentally” (Ayres 161). Her example traces how the “French Belle of 1991 resembles the Arab Jasmine of 1992, who resembles the Native American Pocahontas of 1995, who resembles the gypsy Esmeralda of 1996, who resembles the Greek Meg of 1997, who resembles the Chinese Mulan of 1998” (Ayres 161). These types of issues are not necessarily recognized by the audience, but that is why it is important to critically examine these films as the analysis helps us better understand what the stories have to say about the society that embraces them.

Disney has also been criticized for its formulaic plots that end with neat and tidy resolutions. In contrast to Disney’s adaptations that let the protagonists find their true love and live happily ever after in a magical kingdom, other authors rewrite the tales to give the heroes flaws and pair them with commoners rather than royalty. One such example is Robin McKinley’s *Spindle’s End* (2000) which matches the Sleeping Beauty heroine with the village blacksmith rather than the prince. This trend has become more common since the 1970s, as “the fairy tale for adults has become more aggressive, aesthetically more complex and sophisticated, and more insistent on *not* distracting readers but helping them focus on key social problems and issues in their respective societies” (*Spells* xxvii-xxviii). Elizabeth Ann Scarborough’s book, *The Godmother* (1994), deals with a social worker who enlists the magical aid of a fairy godmother to help solve the problems of her clients, who just happen to resemble fairy tale characters like Snow White, Cinderella, and Hansel and Gretel.
This appears to be another step in the evolving nature of fairy tales as new authors continually use the vehicle to point out civilization’s problems in a hope to better society. Zipes concludes his discussion on the development of fairy tales in this manner: “the worlds portrayed by the best of our fairy tales are like magic spells of enchantment that actually free us. Instead of petrifying our minds, fairy tales arouse our imagination and compel us to realize how we can fight terror and cunningly insert ourselves into our daily struggles and turn the course of the world’s events in our favor” (Spells xxx). This is exactly the power held by fairy tales: we use them, whether consciously or subconsciously, to produce hope and possible ways to combat the trials of life. At a time of rampant divorce, Disney’s two tales about single-parent homes offer hope that strong and lasting nuclear families can arise if the new couples base their relationships in equality. It is this optimistic ending that satisfies viewers, and the company has tapped into the delivery of such happy solutions with prolific results. It is with this in mind that I now turn to Disney’s popularity and the prevalence of single-parent families in fairy tales.
Chapter Two:

Disney’s Animated Films and the Prevalence of Single-Parent Families in Fairy Tales

Disney is certainly not the first to appropriate the fairy tale, but during the twentieth century of the United States, Disney acquired what Jack Zipes terms a “cultural stranglehold” over it (Fairy 72). The accomplishment of such an immense task requires the public’s assistance; they must accept Disney’s works and endorse them by attending and purchasing the company’s products. They would only do this if they liked them, so there is something within Disney’s films like The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast that is resonating with the public. Annalee Ward claims that Disney’s versions of classic fairy tales obscure the original stories until they “are forgotten or dismissed as not the real thing” (2), so it is the changes that Disney incorporates within the films that is particularly connecting to the public. Millions of individuals are supporting Disney each year, so it is important to take a deeper look at this corporation and its eminence in the United States. Following this discussion, I will look at the prevalence of single-parent families in fairy tales and connect this phenomenon to the high maternal mortality figures of the past and the escalating divorce rates of the mid-to-late twentieth century. I will finish by connecting this latter issue to Disney’s The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast, especially in terms of the single-parent families represented within the films.

Disney and the Fairy Tale

Despite the prominence of Disney films in popular culture, many are tempted to disregard them when it comes to critical analysis. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura
Sells offer various reasons for this avoidance in From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture: “legal institutions, film theorists, cultural critics, and loyal audiences all guard the borders of Disney film as ‘off limits’ to the critical enterprise, constructing Disney as metonym for ‘America’—clean, decent, industrious, ‘the happiest place on earth’” (3). For example, film theorists perceive it as “the ugly stepsister unfit for the glass slipper of high theory…Disney is below artistic and critical worth” (3), while mass audiences see it “not beneath artistic attention, but above reproach” (4).

Enlisting the help of some students at the University of South Florida through the creation of a graduate-level course in the analysis of Disney film, the authors stated, “our students commonly complained, ‘You’re reading too much into this film!’ and ‘You can’t say that about Walt Disney!’” (4).

Nonetheless, Disney, like any commercial businesses, does not stand innocently beyond the reach of politics and culture, whatever we may wish to believe. In 1943, for example, Walter Wanger reported that Disney had done much to further the cause of the United States military during World War II: “More than ninety percent of the facilities of his studio has been devoted—since Pearl Harbor—to the making of films for our armed services and other governmental agencies....All such pictures come first at Disney’s. Everything is pushed aside when the Government wants a job done in a hurry” (Smoodin 46). Broadening that influence to other countries, The Three Caballeros (1945) was the result of Walt Disney’s goodwill ambassador tour of South America. He had been recruited by the U.S. State Department to “show the truth about the American way” and “carry a message of democracy and friendship below the Rio Grande” (“Rockefeller and
Whitney Hire Disney to Make Goodwill Films” 14). This was in an attempt to combat Nazi propaganda during World War II (Woll 55).

More than four decades later, the words of Michael D. Eisner, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Disney since 1984, seem to admit a similar connection to politics and the world at large. As stated in The Walt Disney Company’s 1989 Annual Report, he says, “We think we are very well prepared for the future, a future that will, as the future always does, bear witness to change—change politically around the world and change economically around the world. We will address that change as it happens while we continue on our present course. We will make movies” (4). This suggests an awareness of the natural shifts in ideology that occur over time and a desire to stay up to date with these modifying viewpoints. If Disney is successful at meeting the changing needs and wants of its audience, then that accomplishment should be visible both financially for the company and in terms of popularity for the masses.

Disney accounts for a significant percentage of the films people attend and buy. In its 2003 Annual Report, Disney pointed out its eminence in creating motion pictures which are highly appreciated by its audience. “During the calendar year, The Walt Disney Studios became the first in history to achieve more than $3 billion in worldwide box office” (3). “In home entertainment markets, the studio continued to dominate the family entertainment sector, retaining its number one position” (17) and “releasing eight of the top 20 video titles of the year” (22). In its 2004 Annual Report, similar statements were made. “The Walt Disney Studios enjoyed another impressive year, marking the ninth time in the last 11 years that the studio has passed the $1 billion mark at the
domestic box office, and the first time in history an international distribution company has passed the $1 billion mark for 10 consecutive years” (25).

While these numbers are generated by more than just animated features, impressive figures are found there too (Table 2.1). In 1993, Disney’s animation accounted for 12 of the top 20 “all-time best-selling domestic home video titles” (1993 11), and this was before it had even re-released classics such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Its animated features—and accompanying music, books, toys, and clothes—appear throughout homes in the United States and beyond. Children, adolescents, and adults act as receptive audiences, many eagerly awaiting new additions to the Disney library. Even school systems and public libraries circulate Disney films (Bell, Hass, and Sells 6).

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**Table 2.1: Disney’s Animated Features in the Top 20 All-Time Best-Selling Domestic Home Video Titles as of 1993**

*(1993 Annual Report 11)*

Disney’s grip on animated fairy tales has long ruled the market. Zipes avows in *Happily Ever After* that Disney “set the standards for feature-length fairy-tale films in the world of cinema” (89) and that no studio or filmmaker “can really challenge Disney Studios’ corporate power over the means of distribution and the market for fairy-tale films” (95). Only recent steps from the computer-animated movies of DreamWorks Pictures with *Shrek* (2001) and *Shrek 2* (2004) offer an alternative as popular with the
public—yet even this manifestation of the fairy tale genre is more of a reaction against those produced by Disney. Its enjoyment is derived from flipping the traditional story upside down and literally turning a princess into an ogre and an ogre into a prince. Furthermore, these endeavors are at least a decade after Disney’s release of The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast when “[d]espite noble efforts by productions other than Disney’s, film animation by the Disney company still dominate[d] the children’s market for entertainment” (Ayres 48)

The widespread appeal of Disney’s animated classics has brought the issue of mass media into the realm of fairy tales. While once children may have learned any number of variations of their favorite stories in the form of retellings, now the Disney versions are practically the only ones they know. To state this more acutely, it seems the majority of today’s children (and even many adults) see Disney’s versions as the most correct forms of these classic tales and hold up all other variations to these animated features. Betsy Hearne commented on this new development by relating an experience while attending Desert of Roses, an opera based on “Beauty and the Beast.”

I overheard a man behind me whisper to his companion, ‘Where’s Gaston?’ I wanted to turn around and tell him, ‘Gaston is not part of the fairy tale. The Disney film has added Gaston to kill the Beast. And has subtracted Beauty’s sisters. And, in the fairy tale, the Beast never fights with wolves or gets stabbed in the back, and the magic objects in the castle never fight with the townspeople, and no evil insane-asylum director ever threatens to take Beauty’s father away to an institution. And no teacup named Chip rescues Beauty.’ (Beauties 159-160)
Disney willingly changes the storyline of fairy tales and finds economic success in doing so. As I have mentioned before, alteration is not uncommon but innate in this genre; indeed, the changes made are revelatory. According to Ward, “Disney rewrites the original tales for its particular version of American values” (2), values which traditionally uphold the nuclear family. Since Disney’s films are popular with the public, it suggests a resonation with the ideology of American society. Zipes says Disney makes stories that will “appeal to large audiences of all age groups and social classes” (Happily 89) and seeks “to make the characters and background as lifelike as possible” (Happily 92). Therefore, by studying the various additions, deletions, and adjustments Disney makes to fairy tales, we will enlighten our understanding of today’s culture. It can help us realize what is going on around us, what we fear, and what we hope as a society. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate how The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast show an interest in relationships of equal partnership and in changing views of fatherhood. Before I can do that, however, first we must consider the family structure frequently found in fairy tales and connect it to the past and the 1980s.

**Prevalence of Single-Parent Families in Fairy Tales: Death and Divorce**

Single parents are the underlying basis of many family units in fairy tales, such as “The Six Swans,” but the figure usually analyzed by folklorists is the stepmother.\(^7\) She

\(^7\) Perhaps the high frequency of a wicked stepmother derives from the life of the female storyteller, herself once feeling persecuted by her mother-in-law. This is one line of reasoning used by Marina Warner in *From the Best to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. She explains that the French word “belle-mère” refers to both stepmother and mother-in-law (218). “In English usage, ‘mother-in-law’ meant stepmother until the mid-nineteenth century, while the term ‘daughter-in-law’ was used for stepdaughters as well” (218). When reviewing fairy tales traditional told by females, this can change the message of the narrative. Perhaps the absent mother is only symbolically dead as the biological mother is replaced with a mother-in-law. “Taking the story from one vantage point, and imagining that the storyteller is remembering her own life, and is speaking as a daughter-in-law, we can hear her venting all her antagonism
acts as a foil to the young maiden trying to find happiness and thwarts the young man
pursuing his quest. While so much has been said on this topic of the stepmother, few
have stopped to realize this phenomenon is more akin to a symptom of a larger issue—
that of single-parent families. Why must the original mother be killed off so
unceremoniously? For example, in “Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs” she lives only
long enough to give birth to the heroine: “when she was born the Queen died. After a
year had gone by, the King took another wife” (Brothers Grimm 162). In other tales, like
“The Twelve Dancing Princesses,” no mention is made of the mother at all. This is a
topic that needs to be addressed but has commonly been overlooked.

Perhaps back in the infancy of fairy tales, this phenomenon was reflective of the
lifespan of women. David Herlihy’s studies of ancient biologists, such as Aristotle,
“affirmed that men [in antiquity] live[d] longer than women,” and this is supported by
modern studies of funeral inscriptions from classical antiquity that estimated men in this
time period “could expect to outlive women by as much as 4, 5, 6, or 7 years” (Women
5). For the early Middle Ages8, Herlihy consulted monasterial surveys of serfs on great
estates which typically reported more men than women (“Natural” 59). The medieval
laws and penalties for causing injury or death suggested similar findings: “The fines
protecting women were usually as high as, and sometimes higher than, those protecting
men, and women of childbearing age sometimes enjoyed special value” (“Natural” 59).

against the older woman who as it were bewitched her and her potential allies, including the man she
married” (219). This is one possibility; another is connected to the Grimm Brothers. Warner explains that
“in their romantic idealism, the Grimms literally could not bear a maternal presence to be equivocal…and
preferred to banish her altogether. For them, the bad mother had to disappear in order for the ideal to
survive and allow Mother to flourish as symbol of the eternal feminine, the mother land, and the family
itself as the highest social desideratum” (212). In this way, the ideal of a good mother is preserved while
undesirable characteristics are instead attached to the stepmother (Bettelheim 69).

8 It should be noted that data from the Middle Ages is rarely without flaws. Documentation is limited
and of those surviving, few can be considered wholly accurate. Informed estimates are therefore often the
best to be expected.
Even the marriage customs of the Germans during this time reflected more of the same, for the dowry was provided by the groom rather than the bride ("Natural" 59). This “suggests that women in their child-bearing years were in short supply and much valued” (Women 5).^

Studies after the Middle Ages also support the claim that many women died in childbirth. B. M. Willmott Dobbie’s examination of maternal mortality in an area of southern England from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries gave an estimated rate of 26.8 mothers dying for every 1000 births (90). It was not until the following century that the numbers began to decrease. Frances and Joseph Gies expressed it this way: “Throughout the ages, until antisepsis and improvements in obstetrical techniques arrived in the nineteenth century, childbirth was a mortal hazard. Rich or poor, women suffered and were injured in labor; often they died” (5).

Is it this high rate of death among women that accounts for the frequency of single-parent families in fairy tales? It is a definite possibility since folklore is commonly based in the concerns of society. Considering these figures, the frequency of single-parent families in olden-day fairy tales may very well have mimicked the painful reality that many mothers died during childbirth. Today, however, this problem is certainly not as common in developed countries. The World Health Organization, along with UNICEF and UNFPA, collected data on maternal mortality in 2000. They estimated that for every 100,000 mothers, 20 died during live birth (AbouZahr and Wardlaw 2). The U.S. Census

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9 Starting in the eleventh or twelfth century, the amount of women in medieval society increased ("Natural" 60). In a study of 1427 Florence, Herlihy discovered more than half the adult females were widows ("Natural" 67). According to the studies of Frances and Joseph Gies, “if a woman survived the perils of childbirth she had a good chance of outliving her husband” (157).

10 Maternal mortality refers to the death of women related to pregnancy, labor, or six weeks after the termination of the pregnancy.
Bureau has collected data on this subject for years and published some of it in “Mini-Historical Statistics.” Graph 2.1 shows the decline in maternal deaths per 10,000 births from 1920 to 2000 in the United States (21-22).

Graph 2.1: Maternal Deaths in the United States from 1920 to 2000

The question becomes, if the death of the mother is not as common today, why are so many fairy tales still rooted in families with only one parent left to raise the child or children? When new authors rework the stories, this single-parent element seems to remain. The magic of the story may be removed, the traditional roles reversed, or new obstacles added, but the child is still raised by a solitary biological parent. It may be a father (“Cinderella”) or a mother (“Jack and the Beanstalk”), but the frequency of this condition is one that deserves a closer look.

I have uncovered only one scholar that truly seems to focus on this topic of single-parent families, Josephine Evetts-Secker, who has a series of children’s books

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11 In the film *Ever After* (1998) based on *Cinderella*, the fantastical fairy godmother is replaced by the historical figure of Leonardo da Vinci. In the politically correct “Little Red Riding Hood” (1994) by James Finn Garner, the grandmother leaps out of the wolf’s mouth and beheads the woodcutter. In *Enchantment* (1999) by Orson Scott Card and based on *Sleeping Beauty*, the hero finds himself in the historical past rescuing the princess and then the princess must learn to survive in his modern-day world. In each of these respective, recent retellings, only one biological parent exists for the heroine: father (who dies while she is still young), mother (mentioned briefly in the beginning), and father (despite the fact that the traditional version of *Sleeping Beauty* has *both* parents).
devoted to such relationships. Grouped according to the parent and child involved, the four books cover mother-and-daughter, mother-and-son, father-and-son, and father-and-daughter tales. Each book offers approximately ten stories and closes with a couple pages of explanatory notes. While this is a wonderful way to approach the subject for children, it is time to open the discussion and examine it in a more formal and critical setting. Furthermore, my analysis will show how the unique father-daughter relationships in Disney’s two films of 1989 and 1991 are distinctly connected to the issues of the United States in the late-twentieth century.

I chose this particular parent-child association because I was intrigued by its connection and relevance to society. Traditionally, fathers do not hold the title of nurturer. I was curious how this type of figure would interact with the development of a young woman, for many fairy tales “slant towards the tribulations of women, and especially young women of marriageable age” (Warner xix). Moreover, among the fairy tales that Disney has animated into feature-length films, this combination happens the most frequently. I felt that occurrence deserved a closer examination. Was there a reason this coupling was so prevalent? Did it hold some significance to society in the United States? The answer I found was a resounding yes, and it has to do with the American public’s desire for more active fathers, a concern connected to the escalating dissolution of marriages and the debate on fatherhood.

Divorce became a hot topic in the latter part of the twentieth century as divorce rates began to climb steadily while legal statutes were changed, “making it possible to end a marriage without establishing specific grounds” (Hawes and Nybakken, Family

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12 As an increasing amount of fathers were criticized for abandoning their children in the late-twentieth century, I refer to an active father as one who fulfills his duties to the family by helping raise the children, physically, emotionally, mentally, and morally.
25). Based on the rising figures, estimates began to circulate that “[n]early half of recent first marriages may end in divorce” (17) as stated in a report from the U.S. Census Bureau written by Rose Kreider and Jason Fields entitled the *Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 1996*. Indeed, the numbers had increased—peaking in 1979 and 1981 at a rate of 5.3 per 1000—but then the numbers began to decline. Graph 2.2 shows the ascent and descent of the divorce rate as stated by the U.S. Census Bureau in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2003* (72).

![Graph 2.2: Divorce Rates in the United States from 1950 to 2000](image)

As divorces increased, so did the number of children involved. Graph 2.3 represents the rate per 1000 children under 18 years of age in the United States who were involved in divorces and annulments. The data comes from Brian Willats’ “Breaking Up Is Easy to Do” (5-6) and the U.S. Census Bureau’s *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2003* (72). It shows...
that the rate doubled between 1950 and 1970 and continued to escalate during the next decade. It began to level off in the mid-70s and remain rather constant through the 80s. Since the mid-1970s, each year over one million American children have watched their parents divorce. Graph 2.4 charts this unfortunate trend, showing the estimated number of children affected solely by divorce in the United States from 1940 to 1990. It is based on data from Kingsley Davis’s “The American Family in Relation to Demographic Change” (258) and the U.S. Census Bureau’s *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1981* (80) and *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1996* (105). Davis states a 420% increase in the number of children affected by divorce between 1940 and 1970 (225), and that number only continued to climb over the next decade. With such figures, it is no wonder divorce became a topic of increasing speculation and concern during this time—one that could very well find its way into the fairy tales of its day.

![Graph 2.4: Number of Children Affected by Divorce in the United States from 1940 to 1990](image)

*The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast*

During this time of widespread divorce and its conjectured escalation, Disney unveiled *The Little Mermaid* in 1989 and *Beauty and the Beast* in 1991. It had been
thirty years since its last feature-length animation of a fairy tale (*Sleeping Beauty* in 1959), and these two films were eagerly embraced by the American public. Created at a time when divorce was rampant, I believe each story was adapted—whether consciously or not—to express the possible obstacles of living in a single-parent family. That a father heads a family without a mother in each film is significant as it points toward an American concern of whether a single dad can successfully raise his children.

Fatherhood was a heavily-debated topic of the time. Some divorced dads were struggling to overcome laws that favored mothers gaining custody of the children. Other fathers clearly abandoned the responsibility. David Popenoe states, “between 1960 and 1990, the percentage of children living apart from their natural fathers more than doubled, from 17 percent to 36 percent....[T]he decline of fatherhood is a major force behind many of the most disturbing problems that plague American society” (Daniels 33), such as crime, teenage births, substance abuse, and poor academic achievement. Chapter five will discuss the issue of fatherhood in more depth, but I believe Disney’s films can be interpreted as trying to combat these alarming trends by bringing the role of the father to the forefront of the maturation process for children. Indeed, it is the actions of the father in each story that act as a catalyst to the heroine’s adventures and even the whole tale. *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, however, offer more than simply two Disney animated features with single fathers raising daughters; I believe the real power lies in the type of fathers depicted as they mimic changing notions on masculinity in the late-twentieth century.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Triton’s daughter is fascinated by the world above water, but she does not take steps to live there until he destroys her most precious, gathered
treasures in a fit of rage (Figure 2.1\textsuperscript{13}). He is a very powerful and dynamic character.

With his large stature and booming voice, Triton rules the sea as King. He battles against his youngest daughter’s wishes and is rewarded with her resentment. At the end of the story, he takes an active part by sacrificing himself to Ursula, the sea witch. This is in stark contrast to Belle’s father, Maurice, in \textit{Beauty and the Beast}. He is portrayed as a short butterball—more akin to a stuffed animal than a father-figure. Likewise, his involvement with his futile inventions surpasses his interest in his daughter’s life. It is his blundering error and lost way that brings him to stammer and cower before the Beast (Figure 2.2). To save her father, Belle then sacrifices herself and goes to live with the Beast. It is this dichotomy between the two fathers that proves truly interesting upon inspection. Between the 1980s and 1990s, masculine strength was waning in preference for emotional sensitivity, and the films represent nearly extreme versions of these two types of men. Neither father is perfect but the films can be interpreted as giving hope that people are resilient. Triton learns to listen to his daughter and respect her wishes, and Maurice steps back to let his daughter develop a relationship with a new man.

\textbf{Figure 2.1:} Triton Reveals His Explosive Anger

\textbf{Figure 2.2:} Maurice Shrinks before the Beast

\textsuperscript{13} All pictures from the Disney films are screen captures I took directly from the 2006 Platinum Edition DVD release of \textit{The Little Mermaid} and the 2002 Platinum Edition DVD release of \textit{Beauty and the Beast}. 
Connected to the issue of fatherhood is the absence of mothers in the two films. There is an unspoken understanding that the girls’ mothers have died, leaving fathers and daughters to fend for themselves. It is not surprising that Disney does not show the parents as divorced; as a long-standing provider of family-oriented entertainment, its animation generally upholds a conservative set of values that traditionally reinforce notions of patriarchy. For the films’ heroines, however, the absence of a mother still translates into Ariel having no one to temper her father’s anger and Belle lacking someone to balance her father’s forgetfulness. Perhaps neither girl would have set out on her journey if an attentive mother had been in the home, yet these stories show two young women who do succeed in their adventures and achieve their ultimate goals. At a time when so many children were growing up in single-parent homes, it is important that the fairy tales resonating with the public offered protagonists who face these unique challenges, set out on their own, and triumph against adversity. Ariel and Belle each decidedly leave the presence of her father and resolve to succeed without him.

It is this journey that helps the heroine move from dependence to independence as she separates from her parent and tries to make it on her own. As Bettelheim explains, “Only by going out into the world can the fairy-tale hero (child) find himself there” (11). It is a time of growth as the protagonist leaves the stability of home and sets out on an adventure that often involves finding a true love, and it is through the formation of “a true interpersonal relation [that] one escapes the separation anxiety which haunts him” (Bettelheim 11). The developing partnerships in Disney’s two films are founded in equality, exhibiting an improvement over the unbalanced relationships the heroines had with their fathers. In The Little Mermaid, Ariel marries her long-admired Prince Eric
who wants to hear her voice and opinions; in *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle finds her true love in the magically-transformed Beast/Prince who values her abilities and interests. Each story suggests how to overcome struggles to achieve ultimate success, for the “fairy tale reassures, gives hope for the future, and holds out the promise of a happy ending” (Bettelheim 26).

Fairy tales are frequently based on overcoming immense obstacles, and this is the message its audience receives. As Bettelheim says, “a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence—but…if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious” (8). Being part of a single-parent family is one such hurdle in life, and dealing with this issue is an essential part of Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. The films can be interpreted as showing that imperfect fathers, whether overbearing or ineffectual, will not ultimately hinder their children’s development; in fact, there is the hope that the children will learn from the relationships with their parents and build better ones within the families they create. As in life, it is learning from past mistakes that offers a better future to individuals, families, communities, and nations. Thus, by studying these two films, we can better realize what challenges are facing the United States and what its hopes are for the future. With this in mind, it is time to explore in detail Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. 
Chapter Three:

The Little Mermaid and the Overbearing Father

On November 15, 1989, Disney premiered The Little Mermaid, its twenty-eighth animated motion picture. It was the studio’s “first commercially successful animated feature since Walt’s death in 1966” (Bell, Haas, and Sells 176). It instantly attracted attention for its colors, animation, characters, and music, even winning Oscars for its score and the song “Under the Sea”—the first animated feature from Disney to win an Oscar since Dumbo in 1941. Americans flocked to theaters to see The Little Mermaid, again and again, demonstrating that the film had an immediate resonance with the public. The Walt Disney Company announced in their 1989 Annual Report that it “set an industry record for an animated film with a per-screen average of $6,068 during its opening weekend” (17). The following year, Disney stated that the movie “became the most successful new animated film in Hollywood history, with a box-office gross of $84 million, topping the previous record of $53 million” (1990 19). Merchandise associated with The Little Mermaid began to circulate in such forms as books, toys, music, and clothing. The character of Ariel even received her own half-hour television series in September 1992, becoming the first Disney feature character to do so (Markstein), and she appeared again in 2000 with the release of a straight-to-video sequel The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea about her and Eric’s daughter.

The enduring popularity of Ariel and her underwater friends over the last decade and a half has firmly established The Little Mermaid as one of Disney’s most beloved films. Its striking achievements testify of its acclaimed status, but while the film is
Disney’s, the original narrative belongs to Hans Christian Andersen. Reflecting his experiences, anxieties, and hopes, it illustrates a desire to be accepted on earth and a wish to be rewarded in heaven. While his narrative follows the trials of a heroine raised by her loving grandmother, Disney modified the story and gave that responsibility to an overbearing father who clashes with his daughter. Consequently, the tale’s journey is about a discontented single-parent family that must overcome trials through collective effort before achieving the happy ending of a new nuclear family. The film thereby seizes a concern of the 1980s and gives hope that a new generation of traditional families can be created out of homes distressed by divorce, teaching that what is necessary is the joint cooperation of the family members.

**Hans Christian Andersen and “The Little Mermaid”**

“The Little Mermaid” was Hans Christian Andersen’s “first really important original tale” (Philip 8). It appeared in his third booklet of *Fairy Tales, Told for Children* published on April 7, 1837. Its inspiration may have come from various sources, the foremost example being its similarity in plot to Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué’s “Undine” (1811) about a water sprite who marries “a human knight…in order to gain a human soul” (Philip 8). However, Andersen’s tale is filled with his own personal anxieties and wishes to be accepted, and composing the story was important and

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14 Andersen wrote over 150 fairy tales. The accepted number by scholars is 156 (the ones published by Andersen), but some credit Andersen with as many as 168 fairy tales. Among his narratives are “Thumbelina” (1835), “The Emperor’s New Clothes” (1837), “The Ugly Duckling” (1843), “The Snow Queen” (1844), “The Red Shoes” (1845), and “The Little Match Girl” (1845). Only seven or eight of his stories are retellings of folktales, such as “The Tinderbox” (1835) and “The Princess and the Pea” (1835) (Philip 4).

difficult for the author, leaving his manuscript covered with alterations. In a letter to his friend, the poet B. S. Ingemann, dated February 11, 1837, Andersen expressed his torment.

The latest tale, “The Little Mermaid,” you will like; it is…except for The Little Abbess’s Story in The Improvisatore the only one of my works that has affected me while I was writing it. You smile, perhaps? Well now, I don’t know how other writers feel! I suffer with my characters, I share their moods, whether good or bad, and I can be nice or nasty according to the scene on which I happen to be working. (Wullschlager 167)

As with Andersen’s other stories, this one shows similarities to his life. Pil Dahlerup gives examples of this, listing the mermaid’s desire to be accepted, her unreturned love, and the loss of her voice during puberty (162). Andersen did frequently feel an outcast from the companies he most desired, and Sabrina L. Soracco identifies the heroine’s persistence to move from her watery origins to the land of humans as a reflection of Andersen’s wish to escape the position of an outsider (149). Born in Odense, Denmark, on April 2, 1805, Andersen (Figure 3.1) was the son of a shoemaker and washerwoman. He overcame poverty to eventually rise to national and global acclaim as an author. He felt ugly with his big nose, tall height, and skinny stature (Wullschlager 376), and his stories often show sensitivity to outcasts and reveal that appearances can be deceiving.
Furthermore, Andersen hoped for compensation for his afflictions. In “The Little Mermaid,” this is seen in the heroine’s endurance of hard trials, such as the pain of walking on human legs and the sorrow of not winning the prince’s love. Ultimately, however, she is awarded a greater prize—the possibility of an immortal soul. Jørgen Dines Johansen states it thus: “If life is not rich and fulfilling but rather full of deprivation and suffering, then the immortality of the soul renders justice in the next world possible” (236-37). This is a common theme in Andersen’s stories as good people first endure misfortune before attaining the promise of salvation, and since the fairy tale ends with the sorrows of earth being placated by the blessings in heaven, it is easy to see the connection between the heroine and Andersen’s own personal hopes.

Children may not have grasped the tale’s spiritual moral, but they were not the intended audience. Andersen expressed this view in the 1837 preface of Fairytales, Told for Children. He addressed the preface to “the Older Readers,” and when discussing “The Little Mermaid,” he states, “The [other tales] in this booklet are more children’s stories than this one, whose deeper meaning only an adult can understand; but I believe that a child will enjoy it for the story’s sake alone: that the plot, in itself, is exciting enough to absorb a child’s attention” (Andersen 1069). It seems Andersen realized children would not comprehend the tale’s larger religious implications, but he hoped adults would understand it. However, his focus on a mermaid who gains a chance at heavenly salvation through self-sacrifice is a key element which Disney entirely removes from its adaptation. Disney’s film instead follows the heroine from her time with an overbearing father to her eventual marriage to Prince Eric. As stated before, this metamorphosis of the fairy tale to fit new times is an integral part of its enduring
nature—one that plays a part in how “The Little Mermaid” changed from Andersen’s version to Disney’s adaptation.

**Disney’s Key Alterations to “The Little Mermaid”**

Maria Tatar says our “own culture’s answer to Andersen’s spiritually triumphant mermaid appears in the adventurous, rebellious, curious, and ‘upwardly mobile’ Ariel created by Disney Studio” (*Classic* 215). Begun in 1985 (Bell, Haas, and Sells 110), *The Little Mermaid* incorporates numerous departures from Andersen’s tale, ranging from general concepts on the family to minute details like the naming of some characters (Ariel, Triton, Ursula, and Eric) and the adding of others (Flounder, Scuttle, and Sebastian). Replacing Andersen’s focus on earning an immortal soul is Disney’s interest in the heroine’s struggle with her father’s authority. Now the driving forces behind Ariel’s visit to the sea witch and the prince’s kingdom are rebellion against her father and love for Prince Eric, demonstrating issues of generational and gender conflict. Marina Warner believes the new structure was “doubtless produced after hours of script discussion and audience research” (404). With divorce on the rise in the 1980s and families and relationships being restructured, this may very well have affected some of the principal changes Disney incorporated—in particular, the removal of the grandmother and the increase in the father’s role, as well as the new happy ending which is achieved through marriage and the formation of a nuclear family.

At a time of rampant divorce, Disney chose a narrative that had a single parent in the form of the mer-king. Disney took that tale and increased the king’s role from distant
father-figure to concerned, disciplinary parent. In Andersen’s version, the father is not a prominent character in the raising of his daughters: “The sea king had been a widower for some years, and his aged mother kept house for him…[S]he was very devoted to her granddaughters, the little sea princesses” (303-04). It is to the grandmother that the little mermaid goes when she has questions about the world on land, and it is the grandmother that teaches her about immortal souls, so important to the tale. Indeed, the text only has one reference that gives any direct contact between the little mermaid and her father. When she is living in the prince’s palace, her sisters come to visit her every night, but only once did she see “in the distance her old grandmother…and also the old sea king with his crown on his head. They both stretched out their hands toward her, but they did not venture so near to the shore as her sisters” (324). Even on the day when she is destined to die, her father does not come with her sisters and bid her return to the sea.

Disney changes all this, however. Richard Finkelstein explains that “Disney substitutes a patriarchal mer-kingdom for Andersen’s matriarchal one, in which the grandmother seems both principal parent and figure of authority” (Ayres 137). He goes on to say that because “it omits the grandmother,…a girl comes of age without any woman present to whose cultural or psychological place she can aspire” (137). By completely removing the grandmother, Disney echoes American families of the late 1980s who had more single fathers raising children than grandmothers. Myron A. Marty explains that Americans were more apt to move away from their hometown and raise families elsewhere, bringing an “increased mobility of families, which placed children at

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16 The fact that the king remains a widower in Disney’s version is not a reason to dismiss the possibility that Triton represents a divorced parent. Disney is often criticized, or praised, for frequently portraying idealized worlds where, for example, a parent is single not because he/she was unable to avoid divorce but because of the unpreventable death of a spouse.
great distances from grandparents, aunts, and uncles” (182). In Helen Mendes’s study on single fathers, she states that this is “a time in history where extended families do not readily assume the kinds of responsibilities they assumed without question in the past. In today’s world, the widower, divorced or separated father with young children, by and large, has to manage on his own” (439). Her study showed that few single fathers have kin nearby, and those who do feel they cannot ask for constant assistance (441).

Perhaps in reflection of this trend, Disney removes the grandmother and places the father in a leading role. Finkelstein states that “the father is given both vastly increased presence and a name: the large, imposing King Triton, whom even Prince Eric’s sailors know in advance (as if he were Poseidon17)” (Ayres 134). The audience’s initial introduction to Ariel’s father, for example, is a moment seeped in awe and fear. Singing about the mysterious world underwater in “Fathoms Below,” Prince Eric’s sailors pull up a net bursting with fish. On deck, a different man gratefully comments on the weather: “A fine strong wind and a following sea. King Triton must be in a friendly-type mood.”18 When Eric’s guardian, Grimsby, mocks the nonsense of mer-people, another man is quick to defend their existence. It seems even seasoned sailors—men not under Triton’s rule—are wary of his power and sovereignty. With such an introduction, the audience immediately recognizes that Triton has authority and control and that his temper can influence even the elements. Aware that to anger or disobey Triton spells disaster, this prominent new position of the mer-king in Disney’s production shows an

17 In Greek mythology, Poseidon is the god of the sea and is feared and worshipped for his mighty power over this element (and others) of the earth.

overbearing parent who governs with might to enforce his rules. Even his golden trident, representative of his reign over subjects, acts as an oceanic ancestor to the proverbial iron fist ruled by some parents over their children.

It is exactly this authoritarian behavior displayed by King Triton that drives Ariel to Ursula, the sea witch. In Andersen’s original version, the excursion is not prompted by a direct defiance to her father’s orders—or to his act of destroying a beloved collection of human treasures. The daughter simply vocalizes her decision privately: “While my sisters are dancing away in Father’s castle, I will go to the sea witch. I’ve always been dreadfully afraid of her, but perhaps she can help me and tell me what to do” (317). This statement almost seems to say the lack of her father’s presence is what prompts the little mermaid to seek out the help of the sea witch. This change in motivation hinges on the involvement of the father, as Disney’s story now addresses how a father’s strict parenting can have adverse effects. This modification is one of the most important differences between Andersen’s narrative and Disney’s film.

The new ending is another significant change. By the end of Andersen’s story, the reader is left with the hope that the heroine will achieve her spiritual reward. The little mermaid clearly states, “I would gladly give all three hundred years I have to live to become a human being for just one day and to share in that heavenly world” (316). Disney’s resolution, however, has nothing to do with immortal souls; its happy ending is Ariel’s marriage to Eric and the creation of a two-parent family. This change produces a story whose perfect conclusion is based on the formation of a nuclear family—an issue of the late-twentieth century as increasing families were breaking apart. This new ending thereby offers hope that two-parent families can rise out of the divorced homes of the
time. This is a significant shift in message as it suggests that traditional families instead of heavenly rewards are the end goal, and this change plays an important part throughout Disney’s version.

**Critical Analysis of *The Little Mermaid***

In contrast to Andersen’s story which has more to do with obtaining an immortal soul than love, the basic premise of Disney’s version is a young woman separating from her father and attaching to another man. Along the way, issues of power, voice, cooperation, and dominance are examined. Beginning with power, Triton is not only the heroine’s father but the ruler of the sea. His golden trident is resplendent as the source of his mighty strength. He governs with authority, but with his daughter he sometimes exercises aggressive force that “conjures images of oppression and tyranny” (O’Connell 6). He forbids contact with the human world, calling humans “[s]pineless, savage, harpooning, fish-eaters, incapable of any feeling,” and will go to extreme measures to enforce his rules, demonstrating an illegitimate use of power. Mark O’Connell explains that “when a father uses the right amount of power for the right reasons, he is being authoritative. When a father uses too much power for the wrong reasons, he is being authoritarian” (112). Triton’s excessive display of anger when destroying Ariel’s human treasures falls closer to the latter category. He wants her to obey his commands for her safety, but he fails to first listen to her side of the story and consider his own prejudice. As O’Connell states, a father “must safeguard against destructive expressions of masculine power and aggression…bullying, belittling, scaring, controlling, and so on”
Before the story can end happily, Triton must soften his overbearing nature, show Ariel he loves her enough to sacrifice himself, and place her desires above his own.

As the sea king’s youngest daughter, Ariel loves her father but does not like his intolerance of humans or disobedience. Angered and hurt by his lack of understanding and severe punishment, she fights against his patriarchal society when she defies him and goes to the sea witch, an older and more powerful woman who openly disregards King Triton’s rule. In exchange for Ursula’s assistance, the little mermaid must lose her voice, and this makes it hard for Eric to recognize Ariel as the one who rescued him. He is searching for a girl with a voice, which can be interpreted as a girl with opinions. This is in contrast to Triton who frequently dismisses what his daughter has to say. For Ariel and Eric, it means their relationship has the chance to be stronger as it develops out of equality, each person regarding the other’s position on important matters. It is this kind of mutual cooperation that ultimately brings the film a happy ending. As Triton learns to demonstrate his love through sacrifice, Eric and Ariel are then able to battle the sea witch. It is the unified effort of the three working together that thereby defeats the malicious force of Ursula, brings father and daughter closer, and permits Ariel and Eric to marry. By taking these characters through a journey of growth, the film therefore appeases the fear of broken homes in the late-twentieth century and offers a brighter future. Those willing to change—like Triton and Ariel—are triumphant, but those consumed with selfishness—like Ursula and her pet eels—are ultimately destroyed.

\footnote{Disney is frequently criticized for its physical representation of heroines who are overly petite and feminine. I have chosen to not dwell upon this subject because my focus is on issues of the family; however, for more on the topic of the physical portrayal of women in Disney’s animated features, see Kellie Bean’s article “Stripping Beauty: Disney’s ‘Feminist’ Seduction,” Ed. Brenda Ayres, *The Emperor’s Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney’s Magic Kingdom* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003) 53-64 and Elizabeth Bell’s article “Somatexts at the Disney Shop: Constructing the Pentimentos of Women’s Animated Bodies,” Eds. Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 107-24.}
As the antagonist of Disney’s film, Ursula strives to counter the trio’s efforts, but in Andersen’s tale, the sea witch is not the mer-king’s enemy. Indeed, in the original story, the little mermaid is surrounded by the counsel of her wise grandmother and the support of her loving sisters, but in Disney’s adaptation “such sources of female wisdom and companionship disappear” (Henke, Umble, and Smith 245). Now the “film shows only the negative side of female rule” (Ayres 137) in the form of Ursula, a seductive and repulsive figure who wishes to take Triton’s power for her own and dominate the sea. By altering this character and her motives, Disney creates a power struggle between male and female. When considering this in relation to changes in American society at the time—such as increased divorce rates—the character suggests an ex-wife or prospective new wife.\(^{20}\) As Laura Sells declares it, “Ursula is a revolting, grotesque image of the smothering maternal figure” (Bell, Haas, and Sells 181). Certainly, Disney’s depiction of the sea witch is one that is accompanied with trepidation, perhaps reflecting a fear of being involved with situations that bring divorce. As a threatening force who is more interested in personal satisfaction rather than communal effort, Ursula is the antithesis of the story’s heroes, and the film’s audience feels justified when she and her pet eels are eventually defeated.

*Introduction to Triton and Ariel*

Triton’s first appearance onscreen is literally accompanied by fanfare as he is regally announced to an elaborate gathering of mer-people. He rides in on a shell pulled by three dolphins and demonstrates his powers by lighting the audience hall in glittering

\(^{20}\) I recognize that some critics will not agree with this interpretation, but for this study, it is an interesting and relevant concept to consider as it contributes another layer of conflict between Ursula and Triton that relates to American concerns of the 1980s.
light (Figure 3.2). Everyone has gathered for a concert performed by Triton’s seven daughters, a musical debut for the youngest, Ariel. When Sebastian, the court composer and crab, says the king’s daughters will be spectacular, Triton replies “especially my little Ariel.” His fatherly pride reveals itself in a possessive diminutive of his youngest daughter. However, his affection swiftly turns to anger when her part arrives in the song and she is absent (Figure 3.3). The fact that he is introduced before the heroine is important. It shows that he commands attention and respect, and it places his influence and desires above hers.

Ariel does not realize she missed the performance until much later. Her immediate outburst is telling: “Oh my gosh, my father's gonna kill me!” Obviously, this is an exaggeration, but it demonstrates Ariel’s fear towards her father’s power and authority. She knows she is in trouble and that a vigorous reprimand waits for her at home (Figure 3.4). In contrast, Andersen’s little mermaid never has a moment of anger or fear towards her father; indeed, she rarely interacts with him. Furthermore, in Andersen’s story, mer-people are allowed to visit the water’s surface; the only rule is that they must await their fifteenth birthday. At the outset of the tale, that leaves the curious little mermaid with five years of anticipation, and she never rebels against the restriction.
Disney’s heroine, however, openly disobeys her father’s commands and collects human treasures and visits the surface. Furthermore, she is impetuous and jovial (Figure 3.5), while Andersen’s little mermaid is described as quiet and thoughtful. This alteration by Disney means Ariel is already inclined to oppose rules and voice her opinions. She is not content to wait patiently but instead jumps impulsively into potentially-dangerous situations. This facilitates and foreshadows the film’s upcoming events.

**Escalating Conflict between Father and Daughter**

The first time Ariel and Triton appear onscreen together, they are in the middle of an argument. He sits high upon his throne, trident in hand, while Ariel floats below him as if she were one of his subjects rather than his child (Figure 3.6). This places Triton in a position of power and relegates his daughter to an inferior state. When he finds out she has visited the surface, he calls the humans “barbarians” and “dangerous.” When she tries to explain and defend the situation, he interrupts. The audience is quickly made aware that Triton has a difficult time listening to Ariel and prefers she remain silent—unless her voice is used for his musical pleasure. As Finkelstein explains, her “father is very proud of her singing, but part of his pride is the thrill of control: When she does not
perform for him, he flies into anger. He does not listen to her desires and give them any validation” (Ayres 142). Therefore, instead of hearing her opinion, Triton literally turns his back to her and lays down the law, reminding Ariel that he is the one in command (Figure 3.7).

Triton: “As long as you live under my ocean, you’ll obey my rules!”
Ariel: “But if you would just listen—”
Triton: “Not another word—and I am never, NEVER to hear of you going to the surface again.”

Humiliated, Ariel breaks into tears and swiftly swims away, leaving Triton alone with Sebastian. When Triton begins to questions his severe attitude, Sebastian is quick to justify the king: “Teenagers. They think they know everything. You give them an inch, they swim all over you.” The crab continues by saying he too would “show her who was boss.” It seems important to them that the child be aware she is not the one with the power. Indeed, to further monitor Ariel’s activities, Triton enlists Sebastian as overseer of his daughter’s actions, easily shifting his familial responsibilities to another instead of working with Ariel to achieve mutual respect and cooperation.
This new duty for the crab resonates with a contemporary trend in the United States: the increase in the number of children placed in daycares in the late twentieth century. Marty discusses this change saying, “By the end of the 1980s it seemed certain that the proportion of children cared for by persons other than their parents, and for more hours of the day, would continue to increase” (251). In The Little Mermaid, Triton does not have a wife at home to watch his daughters—he must find a caretaker outside the family unit. He is busy with his own job as ruler and employs another to care for his youngest daughter. The position of babysitter for Sebastian comes early in the film, and he serves in this capacity throughout the rest of the story.

Meanwhile, Ariel retreats to a secret grotto filled with treasures she has collected from the human world. Unaware that she now has Sebastian watching her every move, she sings “Part of Your World,” its soaring strings communicating strong emotion. Its lyrics, as listed in Disney: The Illustrated Treasury of Songs, express her wish to live on land.

What would I give if I could live outta these waters.

What would I pay to spend a day warm on the sand.

Betcha on land they understand.

Bet they don't reprimand their daughters.

Bright young women, sick of swimmin', ready to stand. (157)

Dreaming of a place where she has the freedom to do as she wishes (Figure 3.8)—and not fear punishment for wanting something other than what her father approves and supports—her words suggest she is willing to make sacrifices to gain those desires. However, until she can find the means to acquire those hopes, she has only the sanctity of
her special cavern. It is here that she can truly express her feelings and enjoy her human aspirations while within Triton’s kingdom. When Sebastian intrudes on the grotto and discovers her secret, she begs him to not tell her father: “Oh, please, Sebastian, he would never understand” (Figure 3.9). She perceives such division between herself and her father that she prefers to hide her dreams from him, never believing he would listen or could even comprehend them.

In further disobedience of her father’s rules, Ariel rescues Prince Eric from drowning in a shipwreck. Back underwater, she is unable to forget about him, despite Sebastian’s attempts to persuade her to forget about the land above water. In the upbeat number “Under the Sea,” he recounts the differences between the two worlds. His words, as written in *Disney: The Illustrated Treasury of Songs*, depict the ocean as a place free of cares.

*Down here all the fish is happy as off through the waves they roll...*  
*We got no troubles life is the bubbles under the sea...*  
*Since life is sweet here we got the beat here naturally.*  
*Even the sturgeon an’ the ray they get the urge ’n’ start to play.* (161)
Conversely, life on land is full of hardships and responsibility. “Up on the shore they work all day. / Out in the sun they slave away” (161). Sebastian explains that on land one could very likely be eaten. His words also illustrate the difference between childhood and adulthood. Here she has no worries and can play all day, but on land she will have duties to fulfill and life will not be easy. The animation during this song is full of brilliant colors and dancing sea creatures, depicting the ocean as a realm promising a bright and happy future (Figure 3.10). The song and animation work together to suggest that Ariel is better off staying with her father as his little girl and living in his house than gaining independence and moving to a world of maturity. However, as in many fairy tales, the protagonist must take the initial step to adulthood, reminding audiences that growing up and separating from childhood activities is part of life.

![Figure 3.10: Dancing Fish in “Under the Sea” Suggest Life Is Better Here](image1)

![Figure 3.11: King Triton Is Enraged That Ariel Is in Love with a Human](image2)

Sebastian is soon summoned to the mer-king’s throne. Triton is initially happy, believing his daughter to be in love with a merman; however, when he learns that her interest has fallen to a human—someone beyond his reach of power—he is enraged (Figure 3.11). He does not approve of Eric and is furious that she chose someone not of their upbringing. Triton’s bigotry can be tied to the increase in interracial relationships in the United States. “According to the Census Bureau, the number of mixed-race
marriages rose from 300,000 in 1970 to 1.2 million in 1990” (Grapes). The figures are even more dramatic among adolescents, with 57% of teenagers having dated someone outside their race (Grapes). Thus enraged by Ariel’s choice of an outsider, Triton goes to her secret grotto to confront her.

At the heart of their controversy is Triton’s demand that Ariel comply with his decrees as well as his prejudice against humans. In Andersen’s tale, there is no rule against contact with the human world beyond the need to first be fifteen-years-old; similarly, any bias towards humans appears to be more a case of the mer-people feeling superior, believing their world more wonderful and their lifespan significantly longer. However, in Disney’s version there is a strong bigotry, one that is enforced by King Triton with his severe intolerance of humans. Whether this change is made to increase the division between father and daughter (Figure 3.12) or to reflect prejudice and interracial relationships in the United States, the result is an acute clash of opinions between Triton and Ariel—and Triton is the one in a stronger position to enforce his beliefs.

Deciding the only way to convince his daughter he is right is through a show of force, Triton proceeds to destroy Ariel’s precious treasures, blasting them with his
trident. Tony Chapman states that in “some circumstances in the domestic sphere, power is exercised in an absolute sense: that is, by bullying, emotional blackmail, or even using physical force to ensure compliance” (2). This is exactly Triton’s plan, and his heated rage is aptly mirrored in the fiery torrent shooting forth from his forked scepter, sending an orange-red glow upon his fierce features (Figure 3.13). Her pleas go entirely unheeded during his explosive tirade. When he destroys her prized statue of Prince Eric, he symbolically hopes to obliterate her love for the human as well. Roberta Trites sees this act as a way for Triton to remind “Ariel that his strength is greater than this other man’s” (146). However, instead of bringing Ariel closer to Triton’s control, it pushes her further away. Since she has no power to overrule Triton within his own patriarchy—one which extends beyond the family to include an entire reign over the sea and its occupants—Ariel searches for a new means to her desires. Resisting her father’s decree and prejudice, she pursues a new course. Chapman suggests that when people resist “each other’s wishes,” they “produce change” (2). Fighting against her father’s commands, Ariel is trying to change his mind and open his eyes to another way. By the end of the story, she will succeed in softening his bias. Until then, it is exactly his domineering nature that drives her to Ursula, someone else who refuses to observe King Triton’s rule.

**Malicious Feminine Power in the Form of a Sinister Sea Witch**

Before Triton and Ariel are ever on the screen together, Ursula appears in all her dark glory. She has been spying on Ariel via a crystal ball-like bubble when the little mermaid realizes she has missed the concert. The audience first hears the sea witch’s
low, gravely voice as she is slowly revealed during a long speech that switches from sarcasm to exaggeration, anger to anticipation.

“Yeeeeeees, hurry home, princess. We wouldn't want to miss old daddy's celebration, now would we? Huh! Celebration indeed. Bah! In MY day, we had fantastical feasts when I lived in the palace. And now, look at me—wasted away to practically nothing—banished and exiled and practically starving, while he and his flimsy fish-folk celebrate. Well, I'll give 'em something to celebrate soon enough. Flotsam! Jetsam! I want you to keep an extra close watch on this pretty little daughter of his. She may be the key to Triton's undoing....”

During this monologue, Ursula first appears hidden inside a large conch shell, with only her eyes glowing from its shadowy depths (Figure 3.14). Her hand reaches out to select a terrified slug-like creature. She brings it to her face, her red lips bright next to the gray pallor of her skin (Figure 3.15). She pauses in her speech to pop the helpless being into her mouth, chew succinctly, and swallow loudly. As she continues with her speech, she soon slithers her massive form out of her seat and falls toward the audience to cover the entire screen (Figure 3.16). Her last sentence is spoken as the screen darkens, leaving her eyes once more illuminated while her black and purple tentacles swirl ominously around her (Figure 3.17). She is depicted as beguiling and vile. She embodies massive femininity and oozes sinister malevolence. With her greed for power and burlesque conduct, her character represents, as stated by Elizabeth Bell, a “cultural trepidation for unchecked femininity” (Bell, Haas, and Sells 121).
The audience is immediately wary and suspicious of the sea witch. She is vengeful, selfish, sarcastic, and insatiable. She derides pleasure from seeing others in pain and gleefully plots their demise. The audience realizes her foul nature as does Triton; indeed, his apprehension towards Ursula is presumably enough to have exiled her from the mer-kingdom. She craves his power, and this is a change from Andersen’s tale “where the sea king is merely a figurehead” and the “sea witch has the real power” (Thomsen 143). Furthermore, in the original narrative, when she aids the little mermaid she is not personally invested in the success or failure of the girl; indeed, she appears in the story only during the exchange of potion for voice and is mentioned at the end when the princess’s sisters bring the witch’s knife.
Disney, however, gives Triton more power than Ursula and thereby creates a struggle for ultimate control between male and female. Displaying a clear division between the two, Ursula’s very first words in the film are filled with the hatred she harbors toward Triton. Now when Ursula offers to help Ariel, the sea witch’s nefarious schemes are a hidden part of the bargain. She wants the sea king’s power and will go to great lengths to wrestle it from him. In return, Triton will take drastic measures to insure his daughter’s safety from Ursula’s clutches. When considering this struggle for control from a divorced point of view, Triton’s character may be wary of Ursula because she represents an ex-wife still plaguing her husband or he may feel trepidation towards her as a prospective new wife who wishes to dominate him.

If Ursula is symbolic of an ex-wife, her belittling attitude toward Triton could stem from their resentful separation. Indeed, Ursula comments upon a time when she lived in the palace. Her disgust of Triton and “his flimsy fish-folk” may arise from a hatred of her ex-husband’s friends whom she may have never liked and felt they contributed to the divorce. Ursula’s interest in exploiting Ariel could then come from a battle between parents. If the sea witch’s character is read as a prospective new mother, Ursula may use Ariel as a way to get Triton’s attention. Perhaps she hopes if she is on the daughter’s good side, the father will also come to accept her. Ursula certainly spends a significant amount of time on her appearance, such as touching up her make-up (Figure 3.18), and has no qualms with using “body language” to catch a man, as demonstrated when she suggests Ariel use beguiling feminine ways to attract Eric (Figure 3.19). For Triton, his heightened revulsion of Ursula and her ways may lie in his fear of being subjugated again to another woman’s rule.
In both cases, Triton’s distrust of the sea witch is clear. She is more interested in herself and the collection of power than in cooperation. She is portrayed as a selfish character that does not consider the good of others or the community, instead being consumed with her own desires. The battle between the two characters then suggests the difference between two authority figures: one who tries to protect his citizens and one who is attracted to the control of her subjects. Ursula is shown as a dangerous figure who is bent on achieving supremacy and threatens society, and the heroes of the film must defeat her before they can generate a happy ending.

Ariel Attempts to Secure Her Dreams

Ariel is hesitant when she arrives at the sea witch’s mysterious cavern; however, Ursula encourages “Ariel to pursue ‘love at first sight,’ despite Triton’s Father Capulet-style punishments” (Ayres 139). By doing this, Finkelstein explains that “Ursula facilitates what postromantic youth culture imagines to be the kind of natural love which opposes parental matchmaking” (Ayres 139). Ursula is capitalizing on the little mermaid’s tendencies to be headstrong and think for herself. Even so, Ariel wavers: “If I become human, I'll never be with my father or sisters again.” She stands on the brink of
independence from her father, and she has already taken the first step simply by coming to Ursula’s lair. She knows that she cannot retain her old life and move to another world without giving something up. In the end, she chooses the new life, exchanging her father for a possible mate and sacrificing her voice for human legs.

Worried about his missing daughter, Triton organizes search parties to find her and Sebastian. When the update comes that there is still no sign of them, Triton moves from his restless pacing (Figure 3.20) to sit dejected on this throne. The animators compose the next shot as a distant view of the disconsolate father sitting alone in the vast chamber. Pretending a camera is pulling back on the scene, Triton appears all the more small and lonely when he is surrounded by such a grand audience chamber that is now dull and bleak, shadowed by more than just the ocean’s depths (Figure 3.21). The king is left with only his gloom and depression as company while he miserably declares “Oh, what have I done? What have I done?” He fears that his severe punishment has directly or indirectly caused his daughter to go missing. Eirini Flouri states, “Some recent studies have shown that father’s harsh parenting is associated with externalising child behaviour” (99) which includes traits like defiance, resentment, and rebellion. Ariel exhibits such tendencies toward her father’s strictness, and the two are not reconciled until he stops to listen and consider what his daughter wants out of life, rather than what he desires for her, suggesting that one way to overcome divisions is by acknowledging another’s dreams.
On land, Eric thinks Ariel may be the girl who rescued him (Figure 3.22), but he is despondent when he realizes she cannot speak (Figure 3.23). Haunted by the mystery girl’s voice, he is hesitant to fall in love with Ariel. This is a significant change from Andersen’s tale. There the prince has only the memory of a girl’s face. The little mermaid saves him from drowning but leaves before he awakens, so when a girl from a nearby convent finds the prince, he attaches his rescue to her. Henceforth, when the little mermaid comes to the prince’s kingdom, he never considers her a prospect for marriage. He treats her like a pet or a child, consumed instead with the vision of another girl.

By giving Ariel a voice, Disney makes a significant change and produces a love based not solely on looks but speech as well. Feminist critics would consider this an improvement, since they see the objectified portrayal of silent women as offensive. For this study, what I find particularly important is that Eric wants to hear the girl’s voice and, by extension, her opinions. This restructures their interaction and makes it significantly different from Ariel’s relationship with her father who rarely listens to what she has to say.
The couple spends their ensuing time together. That night, Ariel joins Eric for dinner, and he is obviously smitten with her (Figure 3.24). The following day, he shows her the town (Figures 3.25 and 3.26) and they almost fulfill the sea witch’s requirement under Sebastian’s well-orchestrated number “Kiss the Girl” (Figure 3.27). By spending time together, they are learning about each other’s personalities. Eric enjoys seeing Ariel’s inquisitive interest in everything, and she likes having the opportunity to be with him and learn about his world. This is an important development because it allows the couple to decide if they are compatible and willing to work together to have a strong relationship. By “dramatizing adolescence as an enchanted interlude between childhood and maturity” (Hallett and Karasek 336), Ariel now has the chance to spend time with a prospective husband without the distraction of her father’s interference or disapproval. While their courtship is shorter than that of some Disney couples, as in *Beauty and the Beast*, Ariel and Eric are still portrayed as complementary.
Ursula’s Plans Are Prevented by Ariel, Triton, and Eric Working Together

Concerned over Ariel’s progress with the prince, Ursula hatches a new plan to ruin the little mermaid and ensnare the sea king (Figure 3.28). Deciding to disguise herself as Vanessa, a beautiful human with Ariel’s voice, she is excited by the prospect of ruining Ariel’s plans and entrapping Triton. Ursula gleefully contemplates the enslavement: “Triton’s daughter will be mine—and then I'll make him writhe. I'll see him wriggle like a worm on a hook!” Her maniacal laughter rings out during the transformation, and she wastes no time in bewitching Eric as well. With the kingdom in celebration and the wedding ship launched, Ursula sings in anticipation of success (Figure 3.29): “Things are working out according to my ultimate design. / Soon I'll have
that little mermaid and the ocean will be mine!” Again, it is clear that Ursula’s true aim is higher than the capture of Ariel—she wants to ensnare Triton and rule the sea with his stolen power. Trites explains that “whereas the plot of the Disney version centers around Ariel’s motivation to gain a man, the subplot centers around Ursula’s motivation to gain the power of a man” (150). In contrast to Ariel who is looking to be treated like an equal in her relationships, Ursula only wants a hierarchal position within hers. She is not interested in sharing her power with anyone; indeed, she is so bent on controlling Triton, the mer-folk, and the sea, that she lets little stand in her way. She is determined to dominate over others and make them subservient to her authority.

In Andersen’s story, the prince is not bewitched into a false marriage; he merely travels to a neighboring land and discovers the princess there is the girl he believes saved him from drowning. For the little mermaid, the night of the prince’s nuptial signifies her death. That evening, her sisters come with a knife bought from the sea witch. They tell her, if she kills the prince before sunrise his blood will return her to a mermaid and she can rejoin her family in the sea. However, she cannot kill the sleeping prince and instead throws herself overboard and dissolves into foam. Discovering she is among the daughters of air and can gain an immortal soul, one spirit explains that “for every day we
find a good child who makes mother and father happy and earns their love, God shortens our time of trial. The child never knows...But when we see a child who is naughty or spiteful, then we shed tears of sorrow, and every tear adds one more day to our time of trial” (331). Andersen ends his tale with this final disciplinary message about being good as he transforms the little mermaid’s “mortal agony into transcendent beauty” (Tatar, *Classic* 214). Disney’s version, however, creates a happy resolution that is based on cooperation and building a new family rather than achieving a heavenly reward.

To attain this new ending, Ariel and her friends must first stop the wedding, but before Eric can kiss Ariel and save her from the sea witch’s nefarious bargain, the sun sets and Ursula whisks the transformed little mermaid into the ocean. The sea witch reiterates that Triton is her ultimate goal: “Poor little princess—it’s not you I’m after. I’ve a much bigger fish to—” She is interrupted by Triton’s arrival. With his trident in hand, he tries to blast the document Ariel signed, but to no avail. Ursula pleasantly explains that the contract is binding but that she would consider a trade. As she speaks, she literally wraps a tentacle around him, symbolizing her desire to dominate him and possess his powers (Figure 3.30). Triton is moved to emotion watching his daughter transform into a shriveling figure, and he offers himself in her place, not willing to let her suffer. Once reduced to a shrunken form, Ursula takes up his crown and trident, the symbols of his reign and power (Figure 3.31).
As a parent, Triton feels a responsibility to protect Ariel from harm. He is willing to sacrifice his life, kingdom, and power to save his youngest daughter. She had once rejected his parental guidance, but it is his fatherly love that saves her. As he offers himself to the sea witch, Ariel finally realizes that he does consider her important, indeed, even more valuable than his own life. Recognizing how much worth he places on her, she feels similar love in return. Their relationship has developed from two individuals pursuing their own interests to one of mutual concern and collective goals—in this immediate case, the removal of Ursula.

Seeing her father helpless, Ariel becomes enraged at the sea witch’s cruelty and attacks her. Before Ursula can employ her newly gained powers to hit back, Eric appears and uses a harpoon to graze the villain’s arm. When she turns to strike him, Ariel misdirects her aim. Furious, Ursula enlarges her size to enormous proportions. She towers over Ariel and Eric and exclaims “Now I am the ruler of all the ocean! The waves obey my every whim! The sea and all its spoils bow to my power!” She is portrayed as exceedingly dangerous, unable to exercise such omnipotence sensibly. The audience is left fearful of her bloated form and arrogance (Figure 3.32). Her rage and newfound power are terrifying as she creates a massive whirlpool and uses the trident to shoot at the
little mermaid. Eric climbs aboard a ship newly raised from the ocean floor and sails toward Ursula (Figure 3.33). He drives the vessel’s broken, piercing mast into the sea witch. Amidst shrieks of pain and rage, she slowly sinks, finally destroyed forever. As Ariel had saved Eric from drowning earlier in the film, he now rescues her from the sea witch’s murderous plans. This puts them on equal terms, neither in debt to the other. Whereas in Andersen’s tale only the little mermaid risks her life, Ariel and Eric are both willing to put themselves in harm’s way to rescue the other.

A Happy Ending Is Secured Through the Formation of a Nuclear Family

With Ursula destroyed, all the souls she had imprisoned over the years are returned to their true forms, including King Triton. Eric is washed ashore, unconscious, and Ariel mournfully watches him from a distance. Triton sees his daughter’s sorrow and comes to finally understand how much his daughter loves the prince (Figure 3.34). He comments to Sebastian that her love for a human leaves just one problem: “How much I’m going to miss her.” Triton then uses his trident to turn Ariel into a human. This important change in the attitude reveals a father who is now willing to put his daughter’s wishes before his own. He had the power at the start of the story to give his daughter
human legs, but he lacked the comprehension of why Ariel would want such a thing. As Brenda Ayres and Susan Hines state in the introduction of *The Emperor’s Old Groove*, Triton “has no wifely assistance” (Ayres 6), so he has to find the answers to raising his daughter alone. As a single parent, he must develop the necessary skills to aid his daughter by himself. Through the course of the film, he learns he can influence his daughter’s life—whether by domination or compassion—and he has finally decided to listen rather than yell at her. His progress can teach a valuable lesson to parents in the audience who similarly struggle to understand their children.

When Triton fulfills Ariel’s wish to be human, she is elated. His gift represents not only the fulfillment of her dreams, but his acceptance of them. Together, the two have softened sufficiently to develop a mutual love and respect. At her wedding to Eric
(Figure 3.35), the mer-people look on from the sea as Triton raises himself up from a splash of water to hug his daughter goodbye (Figure 3.36). The final dialogue of the film comes from Ariel at this moment as she whispers softly into his ear that she loves him. Content with his daughter’s happiness, he floats back to the sea and sets a glorious rainbow in the sky, as if covenanting that his anger will not get the best of him in the future (Figure 3.37).

In contrast to Andersen’s resolution where the little mermaid chooses the life of the prince over her own, Disney lets family members rescue the little mermaid: her father and her prospective husband. At a time when divorce was escalating, Disney’s adaptation removes the heroine’s self-sacrifice and replaces it with a salvation achieved through family ties, allowing the little mermaid to accept the assistance of others. It extols deliverance gained through family members working together to triumph over malevolent forces, which contrasts markedly with families that break apart when times get tough. By providing such a happy ending, the film illustrates the success and delight that can come from unified effort.

Connected to this idea of working together as a family is the concept of equal partnerships. When the story begins, Ariel is the youngest daughter of the king of the sea. She is not accorded the autonomy she wishes, and their relationship is one of an oppressive father and rebellious daughter. Interested in a world where her father is not in control, she falls in love with young man who is her equal, even in his status as a prince. When she joins with Eric, their union is portrayed as a happy, equal partnership. Ariel has moved from daughter to wife, from being scolded to being appreciated. Her father also learns to change as he comes to accept Ariel as an adult and respect her choices. He
tones down his anger and demands and comes to value his daughter’s dreams, even if they are not his own.

_The Little Mermaid_ offers hope that people can change and emerge triumphant from the hardships of life. This is similar to Andersen’s message but with very different manifestations as now the little mermaid goes on to start a nuclear family rather than dying and joining the daughters of the air. With divorce so prevalent in the 1980s, this story could express the trials of being part of a single-parent family and how collective effort can produce a new two-parent family. In this case, a strong, domineering father is left to raise his girls alone. He rules with a mighty fist, but he loves his daughters—even if his youngest does not always realize it. The film could show that such an overbearing parental attitude may not be the best approach; however, it also demonstrates that a child can endure it and emerge victorious. Trites claims that children disobey by “developing obsessive behaviors that cause them to reject their identity” (146). She is referring to the little mermaid’s extreme interest in the human world, but I think that is too strong of a statement. I do not think Ariel has cast off her entire upbringing to embrace Eric’s world; I think she has _learned_ from it—and in a way that will stay with her forever. She has come to realize the essential need for balance and equity in relationships. In the words of Bruno Bettelheim, “[f]or the happiness of both partners they must have a full life…with each other as equals” (295). The film offers a hope that if Ariel and Eric nurture this opinion their family will survive whatever hardships the future brings. If they treat each other and their children with respect, then they can hope for a happy home. With the increase in single-parent families at the time of the film’s premiere, this would have been a comforting message. Two years later, with the release of _Beauty and the Beast_ in 1991,
Disney would revisit this idea, only this time with a different type of father-daughter relationship.
Chapter Four:

Beauty and the Beast and the Ineffectual Father

Two years after the success of The Little Mermaid, Disney premiered its thirtieth animated feature, Beauty and the Beast, on November 13, 1991. The Walt Disney Company announced in their 1991 Annual Report that it achieved “the most successful opening for a new animated film in Hollywood history” by grossing $9.6 million in “its first weekend in wide release” (21). The previous reigning animated film was its own The Little Mermaid, and it trumped that record by over $3.5 million. “With a domestic gross of more than $145 million, Beauty and the Beast became the first animated film in history to earn more than $100 million at the box office” (1992 21). It was nominated for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture—the first such nomination for an animated feature (Smith 46). It won two Oscars: Best Song (“Beauty and the Beast”) and Best Original Score. Its soundtrack became Disney’s fastest-selling and ultimately went double platinum (1992 33). Once again, merchandise surrounded the film in such forms as books, toys, and clothing. Beauty and the Beast was soon made into a live Broadway musical, which received nine Tony nominations in 1994, and after ten years, became “the seventh-longest-running show in history” (2003 21). The film was even followed by two straight-to-video sequels: Beauty and the Beast: The Enchanted Christmas (1997) and Belle’s Magical World (1998).

The enduring popularity of Belle and her enchanted friends over the ensuing years has secured Beauty and the Beast a spot among Disney’s most beloved films. Its remarkable achievements testify of its celebrated position, but while the motion picture is
Disney’s, the story is most notably from Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont, whose version served as the model for later retellings. Once again, Disney made significant changes to the tale, and its alterations resonated with the public as the film proved highly successful and garnered accolades and popularity. A major adjustment by the studio involves the dynamics of the heroine’s family, and it thereby creates a different relationship for the father and daughter than seen in The Little Mermaid. Now the harsh and domineering style of Triton is replaced with the weak and ineffectual parenting of Maurice, and Belle most overcome the situations her father’s inadequacies cause to achieve the film’s resolution. These modifications relate to the issues of the United States in the late-twentieth century, and Beauty and the Beast can be interpreted as offering hope that individuals can arise from the hardships of single-parent homes to create new and lasting nuclear families if the developing relationships are based in equality.

Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont and “Beauty and the Beast”

For centuries, numerous tales about a bestial bridegroom have circulated throughout the globe, and many scholars have attempted to collect and study these plentiful variants. The research of Betsy Hearne has resulted in two books on the subject: Beauty and the Beast: Visions and Revisions of an Old Tale and Beauties and Beasts: The Oryx Multicultural Folktale Series. Along with other scholars, she finds one of the earliest documented ancestors of “Beauty and the Beast” to be “Cupid and Psyche,” which appeared in the second century in Apuleius’s Metamorphoses. Centuries later, the first known literary form of “Beauty and the Beast” was published in 1740 by Madame
Gabrielle Susanne Barbot de Gallon de Villeneuve (*Beauty 2*). Villeneuve was a French aristocrat who “wrote fairy tale romances, drawn from earlier literature and folklore, for the entertainment of her friends at the royal court” (*Beauties 13*). In her novel, *La Jeune Amériquaine, et les contes marins*, she included a 362-page tale of “La Belle et la Bête” (Harries 87; Hearne, * Beauties 13*; Zipes, *Fairy 29*). Elizabeth Harries explains that Villeneuve’s ornate narrative includes a “complex drama of class origins and missing babies that provides some of the tension (and length)…[as] the merchant’s daughter turns out to be a displaced princess” (88). However, the version that “has most influenced ‘Beauty and the Beast’ as we know it today in books and film” (Hearne, * Beauties 13*) came in 1756 from Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont in her shortened, revised form of Villeneuve’s story.

Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont (1711-1780) (Figure 4.1) was born in Rouen, France. She wedded a notorious libertine in her early thirties, only to annul the marriage two years later. Between 1745 and 1748, she moved to England to be a governess, having already taught in homes and schools for twenty years (Clancy 196; Tatar, *Annotated 340*). Establishing “herself as a tutor and writer of educational and moral books” (Hearne, *Beauty 2*), Beaumont published various collections focused on the importance of educating women, an activity

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23 Differing dates are given for her marriage and when she moved to England.
discouraged at the time in England.\textsuperscript{24} By her death in 1780, she had produced over seventy volumes of writing, ranging from periodicals to treatises on education to theology (Clancy 204). Many of her collections were “designed to instill social virtues in children and young adults” (Tatar, \textit{Annotated} 340).

Beaumont’s version of “Beauty and the Beast” is the most familiar and best known in Western culture and “became the classic model for most later works” (Hearne, \textit{Beauty} 21). It appeared in \textit{Le Magasin des enfants, ou dialogues entre une sage gouvernante et plusiers de ses élèves de la première distinction}, along with about ten other fairy tales. It was first published in London in 1756 and later translated into English as \textit{The Young Misses Magazine, Containing Dialogues between a Governess and Several Young Ladies of Quality, Her Scholars}.\textsuperscript{25} Jack Zipes explains it was used “to instruct young girls in how to domesticate themselves and become respectable young women, attractive for the marriage market” (\textit{Happily} 65). A framework of moral conversations surrounds the tales as a storytelling governess named Mrs. Affable teaches six girls, ranging in age from five to thirteen and carrying names like Lady Sensible, Lady Witty, and Lady Tempest. Zipes sees these overtly moral dialogues as a probable result of the historical change in attitude toward fairy tales. He states that after 1730, “it became more acceptable to write and publish fairy tales for children just so long as they indoctrinated gender-specific roles and class codes” (\textit{Spells} xxi). The governess leading the dialogue thereby engages the girls “in discussions about morals, manners, ethics, and gender roles, which lead her to tell didactic stories to illustrate her points” (\textit{Spells} xxi).


\textsuperscript{25} Sources give different dates for the magazine’s English publication: 1759-1761.
Patricia Clancy points out that Beaumont used this same structure in her daily work as a governess (201-2).

Retelling Villeneuve’s “Beauty and the Beast,” Beaumont condenses the tale considerably. She reduces many of its supernatural elements by limiting the presence of magic mirrors and fairies and also eliminates the royal lineage of the heroine (Harries 89). “Most important, however, is her careful refocusing of the fairy’s curse: the prince is forced not only to live in beastly form but also to hide his sharp wits” (Harries 89). This allows Beauty to discover his goodness for herself, seeing beyond his animal appearance and inarticulate speech. The emphasis, therefore, “is on the importance of virtue in both prince and merchant daughter” (Harries 89), while the heroine’s sisters are punished for their spiteful deeds. After the story, Mrs. Affable stresses the importance of Beauty’s obedience and the triviality of appearance, advocating “diligence, self-effacement, kindness, modesty, and compassion as the cardinal virtues for girls” (Tatar, Annotated 340). Although Beaumont’s tale appears determined to instill desirable features in its audience, later adaptations of the story would have their own agendas.

**Disney’s Key Alterations to “Beauty and the Beast”**

Over the ensuing centuries, Beaumont’s version of “Beauty and the Beast” served as the model for interpretations by Charles Lamb, the Grimm Brothers, and Andrew Lang (Thomas 140). In 1946, Jean Cocteau wrote and directed the surreal French film *La Belle et la Bête*; while, the American television show *Beauty and the Beast* combined romance and crime drama during its airing from 1987-1990. As Hearne notes, “the story has not petrified as a relic of the past but has adapted constantly to reflect new variations of
culture and creativity. The core of motifs, images, characters, and conflicts remains constant. Yet the changes of form, detail, and tone show the tale’s elasticity” (*Beauty* 1). Disney would follow this tradition by offering its own spin to the narrative. In fact, the film’s producer Don Hahn “cautioned his fellow workers: ‘Don’t look at either the Cocteau or the television version. We’ll make our own’” (Thomas 140).

Disney’s film still follows the heroine’s journey from her father’s home to the Beast’s castle, but now the catalyst that starts the adventure is not the request for a rose but her father’s inadequacy. This is a major alteration, and when connected to American concerns of the 1980s and 1990s like single-parent families, it outweighs many of Disney’s other changes, such as the addition of Gaston as a macho antagonist or the creation of enchanted servants. This important modification can be interpreted to reflect a challenge some single-parent families encounter: the ineffectualness of the sole parent and the resulting increase in responsibility for the child or children. By extension, this may prevent some children from pursuing future relationships, concerned that they might have to do the majority of caring for the new partner as well. In light of such issues, Disney’s film seems to show that this challenge can be overcome if the new couples base their companionships on equality, having each member mutually attend to the other. This significant difference in Disney’s narrative is created in part by making changes to the heroine and her family as the studio tries to portray the protagonist as a feminist, removes her siblings, and characterizes her father as foolish.

In Disney’s film, the heroine is renamed Belle, the French term for “beauty.” She is depicted as a forward-thinking woman with her preference for reading and her willingness to voice her opinions; however, she is not as progressive as she at first
appears. Beaumont’s protagonist also spent “most of her time reading good books” (61), frequently turned down suitors explaining that she wished to stay by her father’s side, and even stood up to her father and insisted she take his place at the Beast’s palace. As Zipes explains, at the heart of the story we still have “the exact same plot of the young woman who sacrifices herself for her father and for the improvement of a monster such as the Beast” (Fairy 46). For the original tale, “Beauty’s ambivalent position can be attributed to Madame Le Prince de Beaumont’s own ambivalence as reformer who did not want to alter the structure of the family or society and yet wanted to improve the status of women” (Zipes, Fairy 34). For Disney, Belle’s depiction may have been a way to pacify feminists while still upholding traditional, patriarchal values; however, Belle’s strong character weakens when measured against the accomplishments of real women in the late-twentieth century.

During the early part of the 1980s, great strides were made for women in the United States. In 1981, Sandra Day O’Connor was the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court. In 1982, Congresswoman Geraldine Ferraro was the first woman to run for vice president and Sally Ride was the first woman to travel in space. In light of such achievements, Belle is a pale comparison. While she is portrayed as intelligent and overcomes the stereotype of a damsel who must be rescued, she still chooses marriage over another course that might further the advancement of women, such as pursuing a career. What is interesting to note is that by doing this, Belle reinforces the traditional values of creating a nuclear family, and the American masses demonstrated their

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26 I am using Maria Tatar’s translation of Beaumont’s “La Belle et la bête” as it appears in her book The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales. All quoted passages of the tale are from this source.
satisfaction with this ending by purchasing copies of the film and watching it repeatedly in their homes.27

Even if Belle’s character is not especially revolutionary, Disney was progressive enough to hire Linda Woolverton to write the story, representing the first time a woman had been employed to write a screenplay for the company (Bell, Haas, and Sells 114). Before her arrival, at least two other scripts had been produced and rejected. Ultimately she would work for years on the story, collaborating with others along the way, especially Howard Ashman, the executive producer and lyricist who constantly reminded everyone to keep the plot simple (Thomas 144). Even so, she began by consulting various versions of the fairy tale before discarding them. “‘It’s very difficult to take the originals and convert them into a story that works for the Nineties,’ she observed. ‘You have to consider what kids are like now in terms of sophistication, you have to make sure that your themes are strong, that people can relate to the characters, that the story isn’t sexist’” (Thomas 143). Like Beaumont, Woolverton seemed to want the story to relate personally with the audience, and through her attempts to achieve this, the modified tale ultimately reflects issues of the United States at the time. Belle is imbued with independence, but when she finds someone who regards her interests with respect and who stimulates her mind, she chooses to pursue a relationship. By doing so, she finds in the Beast a companion who matches her in terms of equality, which is an improvement from the situation she has with her father who is illustrated as her lesser in areas such as wit and courage.

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27 I am not implying that other reasons cannot contribute to why the film is popular, but if the audience found the ending unsatisfying, I do not believe the film would have been so well-received.
It is this dichotomy between Belle and her father Maurice that is particularly highlighted when analyzing the alterations Disney made to the heroine’s family. Beaumont’s story actually centers on the youngest child of a “wealthy merchant who lived with his six children, three boys and three girls” (60). She is nicknamed “Beauty,” and her sisters are jealous of this special attention. They mock her and are undoubtedly the antithesis of her quiet goodness. As key players within the story, they are Beauty’s foils, highlighting her goodness by their contrasting selfishness. They are consistently depicted as vain and self-centered, and at the end of the story, they are transformed into statues of stone by a grand fairy, unable to regain their human form until they realize their faults. Beauty, on the other hand, is rewarded with her prince and made a noble queen. She is blessed with such happiness because of her virtue, by loving a Beast who is a monster only in appearance. As the Beast informs her, “You were the only person in the world kind enough to be touched by the goodness of my character. Even by offering you a crown, I still can’t repay you for what you have done” (77).

Disney still lets Belle be a model of self-sacrifice by freely taking her father’s place at the Beast’s castle, but by removing her siblings—especially her selfish sisters—Maurice now becomes the character she outshines. Similarly, it makes Belle’s relationship with her father more intimate and thereby more telling of its inequality. Disney’s father figure loses the prestige of once being a wealthy merchant and is instead a crazy inventor, one who is regularly ridiculed by the villagers. Maurice loves her, but he is too concerned with his own inventions to truly see her needs. He does not think twice about leaving her home alone to go and enter his newest creation in a competition.

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28 The brothers in Beaumont’s narrative play small roles, mostly serving to round out the family with male laborers.
located towns away. She looks after him, only living adventures in books. Her first experience outside of her normal routine only occurs because of her father’s carelessness as he becomes lost in the woods and stumbles upon the Beast’s castle. She willingly takes his place as prisoner, thinking more about her father’s wellbeing than her own. It is his incompetence that makes him unable to rescue himself, let alone her, and by turning Maurice into an ineffectual father, Belle’s inclination to avoid getting involved with another man is more revealing as she may fear having to care for the new companion as well. These are important changes to the narrative and they affect Disney’s version throughout, reflecting relevant concerns of the United States in the late-twentieth century as some people feared finding themselves in unsatisfactory relationships.

**Critical Analysis of Beauty and the Beast**

Disney’s heroine\(^{29}\) is a dreamer who longs for adventure but is too busy caring for her father to step beyond her surroundings. She does not resent Maurice but loves him dearly; however, Belle is not interested in adding another man to her domestic responsibilities. She declines Gaston’s proposal, finding him to be a nuisance rather than a partner. With courage she faces difficult situations and with intellect she finds possible resolutions. She stands tall and rarely cowers before intimidating circumstances. She projects confidence in her stature and mannerisms. She is the nearly the opposite of her father, and this distinction is illustrated throughout the film in their personalities, abilities, and appearances.

\(^{29}\) As in the previous chapter, I have chosen to not focus on Disney’s depiction of the heroine as an ideal representation of physical beauty.
Where Belle is attentive, brave, and intelligent, Maurice is depicted as careless, fearful, and foolish. He frequently gets into poor situations and has to be rescued. He is preoccupied with his inventions and neglects his daughter. He is animated as a small round figure with wild white hair that portrays him as crazy rather than distinguished. He is commonly drawn in humiliating positions, whether it is upside down or lying flat on the ground. His inadequacies are what set the story in motion and put Belle in troubling situations. Even when he tries to rectify the problems, he is unable to rescue her and has to be saved himself. He is ineffectual as a father, and Belle therefore has to be the authority figure at home. With all the time she spends caring for him, it is no wonder she does not seek out a spouse to add to her duties.

Occupied with saving her father from a monster’s grasp, Belle does not recognize the Beast as a prospective mate. It is only during their ensuing time together that she warms to his potential as she begins to see his attributes. The Beast is her match in stubbornness, debate, and courage. He does not expect her to attend to his needs but actually takes steps to fulfill her desires. He is a stronger contender for Belle’s affection than Gaston since the Beast recognizes Belle as a unique individual rather than purely as a woman only there to cater to a man’s wishes. Through the couple’s developing partnership, the two come to rely on each other, demonstrating a reciprocal nature to their association, helped in part by an adjustment to the curse which now makes the Beast also have to fall in love. This takes Belle from a single-parent home where she is not in an equal relationship to one founded on mutual respect and attention. It can also be interpreted to offer hope to the film’s audience that a new generation of two-parent families can arise from the divorced homes of the 1980s.
Introduction to Belle and Maurice

As Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* begins, the audience is quickly made aware that Belle is a dreamer. The first song of the film, “Belle,” illustrates her feelings about the village where she has grown up. She sighs that “[e]v’ry morning just the same” and ardently believes “[t]here must be more than this provincial life!” She clamors for new books to read and treasures the adventures they contain. Her favorite story tells of “[f]ar off places, daring swordfights, magic spells, [and] a prince in disguise,” hinting at elements to follow in the film. To set her apart visually from her surroundings, art director Brian McEntee explains that “we start off with warm colors in the background and Belle in blue. She’s the only one in blue in the whole sequence. For two reasons: for legibility, and because she is different from the others in the village. It says something about her character, that’s [sic] she’s blue, she doesn’t fit” (Thomas 168-70). The words sung by the villagers in “Belle” clearly express this sentiment. Bewildered by the girl’s odd behavior, their lyrics effectively express their perplexity.

Merchant: “But behind that fair facade

I'm afraid she's rather odd

Very different from the rest of us…”

All: “She's nothing like the rest of us

Yes different from the rest of us is Belle”

Belle is oblivious to the townsfolk’s comments, intent upon the book in her hands.

Sharon Downey explains that “their words are paternalistic and admonishing, a negation

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of her feelings. Visually, however, Belle shortcircuits these intrusions” (197). She effortlessly sidesteps their activities as she makes her way down the crowded street, her focus buried in her book, savoring its escapades (Figure 4.2). During a later reprise of the song, Belle overlooks an expansive scene of a river nestled among majestic mountains and again expresses her deepest desires (Figure 4.3). “I want adventure in the great wide somewhere / I want it more than I can tell / And for once it might be grand / To have someone understand / I want so much more than they've got planned.” These words illustrate longing, loneliness, and misunderstanding; she is not content with her current situation. As Downey describes it, the song “captures the apprehension that her ambitions are unobtainable in her restricted environment” (195). “Clearly, she aches for…something inaccessible to her in this present world” (196).

This is quite different than the circumstances found in the beginning of Beaumont’s tale. There, Beauty is well-liked by the townsfolk, and they never refer to her as “strange,” “peculiar,” or “a puzzle to the rest of us” as Disney’s do in the opening song. Instead, Beauty has many suitors who are attracted not only to her looks but also her kindness, and it is she who consistently turns down their proposals saying she is “still too young” and “was hoping to stay by her father’s side for a few more years to come”
This Beauty has no interest in leaving her home. Conversely, Disney establishes a dissatisfied Belle who is ready to step outside familial bounds and have new experiences.

Disney also changes things by creating only one village suitor in the form of Gaston, an overbearing brute who is primarily in love with himself. Nonexistent in Beaumont’s story, Gaston chooses Belle as his spouse-to-be purely because she is beautiful, and he believes the most attractive woman in town should be with the most attractive man in town—himself. Belle has no interest in him, but he continues his pursuit throughout the story. Ultimately the villain of the film, he is portrayed as the inflexible chauvinist who is disposed to destroy all that refuses to conform to his will. As Zipes states, he “represents the evil violent male side as counterpart to the Beast” (Fairy Tales 46) who does rescind his beastly ways and therefore transforms into an acceptable partner for Belle.

An even greater contrast occurs between Disney and Beaumont’s depiction of the father. Beaumont immediately starts the story telling us he is not only wealthy, but a “man of intelligence and good sense,” sparing “no expense in educating his children and hiring all kinds of tutors for them” (60-61). When disaster strikes and his merchandise is lost at sea, it is clear that even this misfortune is not due to any folly on his part, it just happened “[o]ne day, out of the blue” (61). Moving his family to the country, the merchant and his three sons work the land, exemplifying the father’s industry and effort to still support his family. Later, when he learns one ship has arrived safely at port, he quickly sets out, only to encounter legal problems with the merchandise and must return empty-handed. This portrayal of the father shows a man who, despite continuous
setbacks, strives to take charge of his family and support its economic, educational, and emotional well-being. The contrast with Disney’s father figure is immediately evident.

Belle’s father, Maurice, is not painted with such impressive colors; he is neither rich, smart, nor in possession of much common sense. He appears to spend most of his time working on curious contraptions, deeming himself an inventor. Indeed, he seems more preoccupied with his latest invention than taking care of his daughter, and how he supports her financially when none of his machines has ever worked is a factor missing entirely from the story. He is presented as a complete failure, and according to Marina Warner in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, Disney “has replaced the father with the daughter as the enterprising authority figure in the family” (318). Maurice is not the one in control of his work or his family. He tries hard, but he is unsuccessful in his attempts to support or defend either. He is frequently too distracted, busy tinkering with his inventions, to take charge of a situation or even realize what his daughter most needs from him. Without his parental authority, Belle must become the caretaker in their relationship. It is she who will voluntarily take her father’s place at the Beast’s castle, despite Maurice’s cries to the contrary—for she has the power in their relationship. Furthermore, whereas Beaumont’s father may have held the respect of the town as a wealthy merchant, Disney’s villagers find Maurice even more abnormal than his daughter. Lefou, Gaston’s small buddy, calls Maurice a “crazy old loon” and one that needs “all the help he can get!” Belle swiftly defends Maurice: “Don't you talk about my father that way!” “My father's not crazy! He's a genius!” Unfortunately it is at exactly that moment when an explosion occurs at her home.
Rushing there, Belle discovers her father working on his newest invention. He is enveloped within a cloud of dust and smoke, pinned within the planks of a barrel he fell into as his short legs flap uselessly in the air above him. The film goes so far as to degrade visually the father figure by showing his underwear (Figure 4.4) and giving him goofy expressions (Figures 4.5 and 4.6). The entire depiction of Maurice is an odd mixture of bland and crazy. He is a diminutive figure with a mass of wild hair. Dressed in homely colors of brown, tan, orange, and green, he is a butterball animated with silly postures and expressions. Any relation he may have to a bear is in the form of a child’s cuddly stuffed animal—one that may be loyal but could never physically save you from the big bad wolves in the world. Likewise, since Disney obviously did not endow this character with superior—or even mediocre—intelligence, Maurice cannot use any powers of persuasion or strategy to rescue his daughter when she is at the Beast’s castle.

Belle is subsequently left with a father who is ineffectual at parenting, incompetent at generating respect, and inattentive to her needs. When she admits and confides to him that she feels there is no one for her to talk to, who does Maurice suggest? Not himself but Gaston—the exact man has she just rejected in the previous scene. Belle tells her father how she feels about Gaston: “He's handsome all right, and
rude and conceited and...Oh Papa, he's not for me!” His reply directs the conversation away from her and back to his work: “Well, don't you worry, cause this invention's going to be the start of a new life for us.” He is so consumed with his inventions, which usually fail, that he neglects to truly hear his daughter and give her adequate support and comfort. His occasional attempts are well-meaning, but they fail to truly address her needs, concerns, and desires.

Lost in the Woods and Imprisoned by the Beast

It is after a year in seclusion that the father in Beaumont’s tale learns one of his ships has arrived safely at port. As he prepares to visit the vessel, the older sisters make requests for numerous material possessions. When he asks what Beauty would like, she says, “Perhaps you could bring me a rose, for they do not grow here” (63). Beaumont is quick to add that Beauty does not really care so much about having the flower; she only asks for it because “she didn’t want to make her sisters look bad” (63). After the father leaves the port, dejected and as poor as before, he becomes lost in a snowstorm at night. When he discovers a grand castle, Beaumont details the man’s utterly polite behavior as a guest in a stranger’s home. The merchant makes one mistake, however, when he notices “a magnificent arbor of roses” (64) and remembers Beauty’s request. As soon as he picks one, the Beast appears in a ferocious rage, calls the man ungrateful, and declares the merchant will pay for this act with his life.

Disney makes two important changes to this portion of Beaumont’s story. First, instead of the father heading out to regain his fortune, Maurice journeys to enter a contest. His newest invention for chopping wood actually works—to the surprise of
himself and Belle. He immediately leaves her alone to enter the logging machine in a competition, but along the way, he becomes lost. When faced with a fork in the road, he chooses the unmistakably ominous path, believing it to be a shortcut. His horse clearly disagrees with the decision (Figure 4.7), but the two set out and are quickly engulfed in darkness. Maurice is busying blaming his horse for getting them lost when bats begin to swarm around their heads, quickly followed by wolves attacking at their heels. Soon thrown from his horse and left alone, Maurice repeatedly falls during his attempt to escape the wolves (Figure 4.8). Running from the ferocious animals, he ultimately stumbles upon the Beast’s mansion. The enchanted servants, such as Lumiere the candlestick and Mrs. Potts the teapot, are hospitable, but the Beast is enraged when he discovers Maurice’s presence. Sentenced for trespassing, Maurice is imprisoned within a locked tower.

Whereas in Beaumont’s tale this sequence of events is precipitated by Beauty’s wish for a rose, Disney removes Belle’s request entirely. This is the second significant change Disney imposes on this part of the story, for now it is Maurice’s inability to navigate that solely produces the subsequent catastrophe. It is his failures that set into action the ordeal that will soon change his daughter’s life forever. Disney consciously
made this alteration to Beaumont’s story in an attempt to add action and tension to the
film. In Beaumont’s version, the father is released by the Beast upon the condition that
he return with one of his daughters to take his place at the castle. Finding the subsequent
journeys of the father and daughter repetitive, it was decided that Belle would come to
the palace. According to Roger Allers, the story supervisor, this “helped energize it a bit”
(Thomas 149).

The result, however, is that Belle is all the more selfless when she goes to save
her father. No longer to blame for his imprisonment by asking for a rose, her position as
the more powerful partner in their relationship is again reiterated. Furthermore, Disney
keeps Belle from symbolically choosing the rose which Betsy Hearne says represents
“love and the suffering born of love” (Beauty 126). This may stand to show Belle does
not wish for more misery in love, that she has enough to deal with already with her
father. What she wants may be a happier, more equal partnership. Similarly, now the
rose—an important part of the fairy tale—must find a new role within the Disney film.
As producer Don Hahn states, we altered its purpose and made it “a ticking clock”
(Thomas 147). The Beast must now learn to love someone and earn her love in return
before his twenty-first year, or the last petal of the enchanted rose will fall and he will
remain a beast forever. This change in the curse puts Belle and the Beast on equal
footing. Now both must learn to love the other; whereas, in Beaumont’s story, only
Beauty needed to develop those feelings.

When Belle arrives at the Beast’s castle and discovers her father imprisoned, she
willingly offers herself in Maurice’s place, not heeding her father’s pleas to the contrary
(Figure 4.9). He fears for her and tries to resist her sacrifice: “No, Belle. I won't let you
do this!” But she ignores him. In *The Good Father: On Men, Masculinity, and Life in the Family*, Mark O’Connell discusses a father who also lacked authority over his children. He “had not managed to assume a position of leadership and responsibility vis-à-vis his children” (63), so they did as they wanted and disregarded his rules. Similarly, Maurice has not procured a state of parental influence over Belle, so she does not heed his commands. Visually, Maurice is trapped within a cell, only able to witness what goes on around him if he kneels on the floor and looks out the barred window in the bottom of the door, scarcely visible to the audience. Belle, however, can stand up and take action in the situation, and she does, vowing to stay with the Beast. Maurice again refuses her offer, this time adding persuasion to his argument: “No, Belle. Listen to me. I’m old, I’ve lived my life—” Neither Belle nor the Beast follows Maurice’s orders. Instead, he is immediately dragged out of the castle (Figure 4.10) and thrown into an old wooden coach, his pleas being completely ignored as it teeters away like a massive spider taking him back to the village.

Figure 4.9: Belle Ignores Maurice’s Pleas and Makes a Vow to the Beast

Figure 4.10: Maurice’s Appeals Are Disregarded by the Beast
**Differences between Father and Daughter**

When Maurice returns to the town and requests help, he is openly ridiculed. One man even states, “Crazy old Maurice. He's always good for a laugh!” while Gaston will later refer to him as a “wacky old coot...[whose] sanity’s only so-so” in song. Annoyed by Maurice’s presence, some of the men easily toss him out into the snow. This shows Maurice’s impotence at enlisting any men to free his daughter. Furthermore, the change in season visually represents his failure. He begins his journey in autumn, but, as Hearne suggests, “his trip carries him into winter—the winter of his old age and to some extent, defeat” (*Beauty* 125). He is left alone in the blistery wind, bewailing his and his daughter’s fate as he pleads to the open sky, “Will no one help me?” He stands beside the fountain located in the middle of the town square. Its water is frozen over, useless in the winter; it cannot serve its purpose of refreshment and cleansing. Like the ice-covered fountain, Maurice is unable to fulfill his role—in this case, as a father. He is incapable of protecting his daughter. He is in the winter of his life and, despite the years, has failed to garner the wisdom needed to save Belle. To heighten this sense of despair, the shot is illustrated as if a camera is pulling away from Maurice. Giving the audience a bird’s-eye view of the helpless figure, he appears all the more weak and powerless (Figure 4.11). He is alone with no means to save his daughter. He is incapable of rescuing Belle alone, and he lacks the respect, vocal persuasion, and strong presence that could have earned him the help of the villagers. These various compositional and emotional elements deeply imprint the ineffectuality of Maurice as a father.
This heightened perspective of a powerless Maurice dissolves into a medium shot of Belle and zooms in on her (Figure 4.12). While the transition ties them together, it also represents how much more strength Belle has since she fills the screen more clearly than her father. She will not stand helpless in the snow; indeed, she will later defy the Beast’s command to come to dinner. Despite this courage, Belle is struggling to adjust to her new surroundings. She makes a comment to Mrs. Potts, Chip the young teacup, and the Wardrobe that is quite telling: “I’ve lost my father, my dreams, everything.” Stated in the first-person, Belle seems to take responsibility for the predicament she is in. She does not shift the blame and bemoan what a mess her father has gotten her into. In contrast, Maurice does evade responsibility in the previous scene. He easily accuses the Beast for the situation when he talks to the villagers: “He’s got her locked in the dungeon.”

Another difference between father and daughter is how they interact with the Beast. Whereas Maurice frequently cowards before him, Belle openly defies his commands. For example, on her first evening at his castle, she refuses to join him for dinner, choosing instead to stay behind her closed bedroom door. Her tone is imperious and filled with disregard for the Beast as she fervently snubs his futile attempts to
persuade her to leave the room, even when he resorts to threats. This shows that Belle does not hesitate to disobey the Beast’s orders, even when she is his prisoner. Her strength of character is firmly acknowledged in Disney’s film, perhaps in an attempt to create a woman who will not cater to the wants of beastly men. The result is a character that will attend to her father but will not voluntarily serve any other man until he takes steps to care for her in return.

The differences between Belle and her father are again made clear when Belle calls the castle “enchanted.” Cogsworth the clock is quick to question why she thinks that: “Enchanted? Who said anything about the castle being enchanted?” To which she conspiratorially replies: “I, um, figured it out for myself.” Her father was not so brilliant when he first entered the Beast’s home. He was certainly surprised by the animated objects, but he never took the time to truly question their presence. Instead, he simply embraced their kindness and commented on their ability to fill all his needs: “What service!” In contrast, Belle uses her mind to ponder on the peculiar state of affairs in the castle. Her intelligence, curiosity, and quest for knowledge and understanding, which was established in the opening scene at the village bookstore, is again affirmed.

After her conversation with Cogsworth, she convinces him to give her a late-night tour of the castle. When they reach the forbidden west wing, she takes the opportunity to sneak away and search it. Again, she disobeys her captor’s law by exploring the prohibited portion of his castle (Figure 4.13). When the Beast discovers her and flies into a rage, she runs away. Leaving the castle grounds, the animation shows her as a lone figure in the desolate landscape, but she is far from helpless. When affronted by wolves, she fights back—unlike her father who merely ran from them. Belle bravely waves a
large branch (Figure 4.14) until the Beast arrives and brawls with the wolves, ultimately
the victor. The valor and strength Belle displays in the face of danger is clearly
expressed to the audience. Indeed, she shows more self-empowerment, intelligence, and
courage than Maurice in each of these instances they both encountered. It is clear that
where Maurice tries and fails, Belle succeeds.

Belle and the Beast Journey toward an Equal Partnership

The inadequacy of the father is what brings Belle to the Beast’s castle. Her
subsequent “isolation at the palace is a vision quest, removed from time, a realization of
maturing sexuality and spiritual growth” (Hearne, Beauty 132). For Ariel, it is her
father’s imperious behavior that prompts her to break from her father’s rule and enter a
new world. For both stories, the time when the young woman is separated from her
father is a chance for her to grow. She learns to face new challenges and eventually finds
a different man with whom to attach herself. However, this bond with a male is to be on
equal terms—neither partner lording over or weighing down the other. While some
feminist scholars may find this new relationship still to be demeaning to a female,
believing it tells girls they must marry to live “happily ever after,” I find it to be a more healthy association than the one each heroine was in before.

Pepper Schwartz also examined the issue of marriages based on equality—which she terms peer marriages—when she published her book *Love Between Equals: How Peer Marriage Really Works* just a couple years after the release of *Beauty and the Beast*. After an extensive study of American couples, she set out to list the common traits of peer marriages, clarifying that the point is “not to define these characteristics as the only way to reach a just, rewarding, and durable relationship but to use them to define the new, and spreading, phenomenon of marriages in which traditional roles [are] absent and there [is] no hidden hierarchy” (5). Recognizing the change occurring in society, she even references the reason so many couples were seeking equal companionships. She says many men and women looked back “at the anger and resentment between their parents or in previous relationships of their own, and wanted to avoid replication” (10). Similarly, she states that many previously-divorced women “left their first marriage because of inequitable treatment” (6). Likewise, Disney’s story seems to echo the trend toward equal relationships that promote respect, equity, and dignity for both partners.

With a mixed audience, Disney’s film reaches a broader demographic than Beaumont’s tale which “assumed a female audience on the whole who fully expected to be given away by their fathers to men who might well strike them as monsters” (Warner 278). In this traditional story, the Beast is a good man on the inside, who is only transformed into an animal on the outside. He never mistreats Beauty, but the curse he is under does force him to hide his intelligence. The first night Beauty is at his home, he joins her at dinnertime. He asks if she finds him ugly. She admits she does but goes on
to say he thinks him very kind. His reply is that he also lacks intelligence. With a
philosophic turn, she replies that a “fool never believes himself to be stupid” (71). As
their conversation continues, she decides that even with his monstrous appearance she
likes him better “than men who hide false, corrupt, and ungrateful hearts behind
charming manners” (71).

This opinion is consistent with Disney’s heroine. She too prefers what is inside a
person over his physical appearance, and Gaston is an exemplary representation of the
physical that she easily disregards. He is the epitome of exaggerated masculinity with his
robust frame, chiseled features, and ferocious appetite for the hunt. He even garners an
entire song in the film extolling his manly attributes. When first designing this character,
Andreas Deja, the supervising animator for Gaston, found resistance with his attempts.
Jeffrey Katzenberg, the production boss, said “No, no, no, he’s not handsome
enough….The Beast is ugly, Gaston’s handsome. The Beast has a heart of gold, Gaston’s
a pig. It’s got to be graphically very clear” (Thomas 178).

To achieve this inner distinction between the two characters, Disney shows that
Gaston is self-absorbed and indifferent to others’ interests, and Belle easily recognizes
this in him. He refuses to regard her as anything more than an object to be won, openly
scoffing her love of books and even tossing one in the mud during the opening sequence.
In return, she rejects his advances, even when it means saving her father from Gaston’s
villainous scheme to have Maurice taken to an insane asylum. As Jill Henke, Diane
Umble, and Nancy Smith state in their article “Construction of the Female Self: Feminist
Readings of the Disney Heroine,” “Belle’s sense of self is strong enough that she refuses
to settle for less than a relationship which acknowledges and values her mind, in essence, her self” (238).

During the first half of the film, the Beast is similarly portrayed as large and overbearing like Gaston. It is interesting to note that neither of these characters is given a father. They are both prone to brutality, and this is similar to some children who lack authoritative figures in their lives. John Snarey mentions in his book *How Fathers Care for the Next Generation* that even something as simple as playtime with dad can affect tendencies toward violence. “Children who roughhouse with their fathers…quickly learn that biting, kicking, and other forms of physical violence are not acceptable” (35-6); they learn when to shut it down. Whether or not the hostility of the Beast and Gaston is tied to the absence of a father in their childhood, they are both portrayed as immature and prone to aggression when they do not get their way.

Other similarities between Gaston and the Beast are offered in the beginning of the film before their differences are revealed. In appearance, Downey explains both these men “possess mammoth heads, necks, and burly chests; and their immense hands dwarf what comes within their grasp” (196) (Figure 4.15 and 4.16). Additionally, where Gaston has his supporters in the form of devoted villagers and swooning women, the Beast has his enchanted servants whom he terrorizes into following orders (Downey 194). In
contrast, Maurice has no friends and his size is especially puny when compared to these men. Out of the three males, only the Beast has both the strength and compassion to successfully protect Belle. An illustrative example is when the Beast comes to Belle’s rescue in the forest. She is encompassed by wolves, and he jumps right into the fray, taking a protective stance over her fallen body (Figure 4.17). He then ferociously roars and pounces on the animals, slashing wildly at them until he single-handedly frightens them away. Gaston could have defeated the creatures, but he would have done it more for his own glory than out of concern for her. On the other hand, Maurice definitely could never have saved Belle from a hoard of vicious creatures despite his desire to protect her; indeed, he could not even save her from one enchanted beast.

In addition, Maurice and Gaston also lacked the capacity to intellectually debate with Belle, but the Beast does not suffer the same hindrance. He and Belle frequently have a battle of words in the beginning of their relationship. Not only do they disagree on whether to eat dinner together the first night, but they have another deliberation after the wolves attack. The Beast is wounded in the battle, and she takes him back to the castle to tend to him. His temper is unleashed, even frightening Cogsworth, Lumiere, and Mrs. Potts, but Belle stands up to it, just like she does to every rough situation she faces.
Arguing whose fault it was that he had to battle wolves, she counterpoints each of the Beast’s accusations with her own, until they reach an impasse that suggests neither were entirely blameless (Figure 4.18). Downey finds this significant: “The stalemate resulting from this parrying is liberating because, by forcing recognition of each other’s culpability and merits, it culminates in mutual affirmation and respect” (202). By acknowledging the validity of the other’s argument, they not only perceive the other person’s strength and intelligence but learn about their own errors as well. The result is a coupling of equally matched partners. This is radically different than Belle’s relationships with Gaston or her father. Gaston is too busy talking about himself to even hear her side, and Belle clearly has more common sense than Maurice and is used to verbally defending herself and him from the villagers.

The principal difference, however, between the three men is that the Beast takes notice of Belle as an individual. He takes the time to learn and acknowledge who she is. Recognizing her love of reading, he places value on that interest by offering her his vast library of books (Figure 4.19). In the Beast’s own words, “I've never felt this way about anyone. I want to do something for her.” He is thinking beyond himself and focusing on her—something Maurice had difficulty with. Maurice’s indifference to Belle’s reading may not be as severe as Gaston’s hateful disregard of it, but only the Beast seems to encourage her interest (Figure 4.20).

Throughout the couple’s time together at the palace, their relationship matures from verbal disputes to emotional connections (Figure 4.21). Visually, Belle’s costume changes as she warms to the Beast. Her cool-blue house-frock is exchanged for a neutral green outfit, then a rosy pink dress, and finally a resplendent gold ball gown. Even the
interior colors of the Beast’s castle progress from chilly, gray-blue tones to rich and inviting pinks and golds. In the words of layout supervisor Ed Ghertner, this transformation is to “make the setting match the emotions of the characters” (Thomas 171) as the couple develops a mutual attraction.

The time the two spend together in the Beast’s palace finds an interesting correlation in the United States when cohabitation was on the rise. Myron A. Marty discusses this trend in his book *Daily Life in the United States, 1960-1990: Decades of Discord*. He reports that from 1970 to 1985, the number of unmarried couples living together quadrupled from roughly half a million to almost 2 million (249). Steven Mintz puts those numbers into perspective stating that “[n]early half of all Americans who married between 1980 and 1984 cohabited with a member of the opposite sex while they were single, compared to just one in nine Americans married between 1965 and 1974” (Hawes and Nybakken, *American* 185). Marty explains that this time of cohabitation “served as a way of finding a compatible partner” (249), and this is likewise the case in the living arrangements of Belle and the Beast. In the beginning, she is there primarily as his prisoner, but they soon come to enjoy each other’s company on equal terms (Figure 4.22), thereby illustrating the benefit of building a solid partnership based on reciprocity.

![Figure 4.19: The Beast Presents Belle with His Library](image1)

![Figure 4.20: The Couple Read Together Beside a Cozy Fire](image2)
Beaumont’s Beauty and Beast also cohabitate for a significant period of time, but their relationship develops differently. He is already a tame and mild person; only his appearance is monstrous. Beauty is the only one who has to change and learn to look beyond his exterior. Even the curse he is under does not require him to love her in return. She is the one who must gradually come to realize that he is not someone to fear but someone to love. Over a period of three months, they share dinner in each other’s company, and at the end of every meal, he asks her to marry him and she turns him down. It is not until she returns to her father’s home that she comes to the conclusion that his kindness is more important to her than his beastly appearance and seeming lack of intelligence. She decides that she will marry him since what makes a wife happy is “character, virtue, and kindness. Beast has all those qualities” (75).

In contrast, Disney rewrites the time Belle and the Beast spend together. The nightly proposal is entirely removed, and the Beast must now also learn to love Belle with the adjustment made to his curse. This change actually puts the two characters on equal footing. To achieve their new life together, both must work to establish and nurture their relationship. As spirited young adults who are willing to give and take in their burgeoning relationship, the lyrics of the song “Beauty and the Beast” chronicle their
journey. The two characters start as “Barely even friends, / Then somebody bends / Unexpectedly” (Disney 170). It goes on to state that it can be “Bittersweet and strange, / Finding you can change, / Learning you were wrong” (Disney 170). Clearly, the two are operating as a team to produce their resulting connection. Downey expresses it as “the unpredictable but inevitable personal and relational satisfaction that comes from cooperation and mutuality” (202).

Even the colors of the characters’ clothes in this scene work to a satisfying end. The rich gold is offset by a vibrant blue, neither overshadowing the other; indeed, the colors actually operate to make each other more stunning. The background is painted with a soft gold and blue, mimicking their costumes. The animated lights glisten in the distance, casting a warm glow of the dance floor (Figure 4.23). Conversely, when they step outside and Belle admits she misses her father, the sequence is clouded over with a cool shade of blue (Figure 4.24). This shows a dampening of their happiness as the colors lessen in brightness and intensity and fade to paler versions of themselves.

The Beast’s feelings toward Belle are such that her sorrow hurts him too. He shows her a magic mirror that reveals Maurice on his way to the Beast’s castle, ill and weak in the bleak, barren landscape. She is heartbroken with concern at his condition,
fearing for him especially now that she is not there to care for him. “He’s sick, he may
be dying. And he’s all alone.” Prompted by love, the Beast releases her from her
promise to stay with him. He does for her what she has done so many times for her father
(Downey 198-9). Without offering excuses or trying to explain what he wishes, he freely
sacrifices his happiness for her. Realizing his condition as a beast will now remain
permanent, he watches her leave. When asked by Cogsworth why he did it, the Beast
replies, “Because, I love her.”

What has developed between Belle and the Beast is a bond founded in equality.
They both have strong personalities, excellent debating skills, and a willingness to give
and take. By incorporating elements of compromise, they create a healthy relationship.
That neither would put their own desires above the other lifts their partnership to another
level. The Beast has given her freedom when it meant his own monstrous imprisonment,
and before the tale’s end, she will risk her own life for his. The reciprocity inherent in
their relationship is what makes it so appealing to not only the characters of the film but
also to the film’s viewers who can thereby distinguish the joy and strength that comes
from such a partnership. It is also what makes Belle’s association with her father appear
so troubling.

Relationship and Reunion Woes for Father and Daughter

There is no question that Maurice loves his daughter and wishes for her
happiness, but he demonstrates time and again that he is unable to provide her with
protection from himself or the outside world. It is his inadequacy that establishes the
story’s chain of events. If he had been content to stay at home and care for his daughter
by working the land instead of tinkering around with a machine and entering it into a contest, he never would have ended up at the Beast’s castle. Kathleen Manley feels that Maurice is more like the child and Belle the mother in their relationship. “Belle encourages Maurice to continue work on his inventions and rescues him when he makes mistakes. Indeed, he seems almost helpless without her. In addition, Maurice’s appearance, which is similar to that of one of Disney’s seven dwarfs, encourages the audience to view him as a child” (Ayres 81). Regardless of how severe their uneven relationship is, it remains that Belle lacks a mother to balance Maurice and perhaps help ease the maturation process for her; Belle has to learn to cope solely on her own.

Sociologists will point out that mothers and fathers are both are key figures in a child’s life, but each plays separate roles. Mothers commonly encourage a child’s own creativity and help imbue him or her with sensitivity towards others. They also promote physical safety by discouraging excessive risk-taking. I discussed earlier that one way a father assists a child is by teaching him when his roughhousing antics go too far. David Popenoe argues that they also provide a unique function for daughters. They “learn from their fathers, in ways they cannot from their mothers, how to relate to men” (Daniels 38). “Fathers are the first and most important men in the lives of girls. They provide male role models, accustoming their daughters to male-female relationships” (Daniels 42). If this is true, then what has Belle learned from her father? I see two main components: that a loving association is wonderful, but that she will most likely have to take care of the man.

With this in mind, it is no surprise that Belle rejects Gaston’s advances. First, she finds no genuine love between them, and second, he appears to lack all domesticity.
When he comes to her home to propose, he props his muddied feet on her table, kicks off his shoes, and leaves his smelly feet exposed. Soiling her open book in the process, he is entirely unaware of the distaste his actions elicit from her. When Belle meets the Beast, she disregards his company as well. Gradually, however, she comes to respect him and find possibility in reciprocity.

However, just when it seems Belle and the Beast are about to unite, Maurice’s ineffectualness disrupts the storyline. Wishing to rescue his daughter, he sets off from his home, which appears especially bleak without Belle’s amiability to warm it up (Figure 4.25). His journey is begun by the declaration that “[i]f no one will help me, then I'll go back alone. I don't care what it takes. I'll find that castle and somehow I'll get her out of there.” It is another attempt by him to help his daughter, but it is she who must ultimately save him as he falls ill along the way. Manley points out that this is a recurring theme in the film as Belle consistently rescues Maurice: first from the Beast’s imprisonment, now from his trek in the forest when trying to liberate her, and later from Gaston’s insidious plans to throw him into an insane asylum (Ayres 81). The result is that Belle must depart the castle, just as the magical spell enchanting the Beast and his companions could have been broken (Figure 4.26). After finding her father lying prostrate on the ground, she helps him home. Their house looks significantly more cheery now that she is there, and Belle sets to nursing her father back to health. She even states, “It’s all right, Papa. I’m home,” as if her mere presence is all he needs to sustain him and make him happy.
Belle must again come to her father’s aid when Gaston arrives with the villagers and the sinister owner of the Asylum de Loons. While she denounces their accusations that her father is crazy, Maurice comes out and naively falls into their trap, telling everyone about an impossibly large monster (Figure 4.27). Maurice is promptly taken by orderlies from the insane asylum, despite his cries to let him go. He is again too ineffectual to save himself or his daughter. Belle tries to enlist the help of Gaston, but he takes this chance to coerce her into marrying him. Without the incompetence of Maurice, Gaston would not have had the needed leverage to extort an engagement from Belle. As it is she resists, but in return she and Maurice are locked into their basement. Maurice is tossed in (Figure 4.28), presumably falling to the ground, as Gaston leads the villagers to find and kill the Beast.
Inside, Belle immediately tries to escape. She uses a long stick to try and push a window open (Figure 4.29), while Maurice is off-camera, supposedly standing idly in the background watching his daughter. Concern for the Beast makes Belle desperate to escape. She crumples to her knees and dejectedly states, “This is all my fault.” Considering the role her father played in the entire sequence of events, this is an interesting comment. Whereas in the original story one might claim the daughter set the story in motion by asking for a rose, in Disney’s version, it is Maurice’s ineptitude in making it to the fair that sets the tale unfolding. Nonetheless, Maurice loves his daughter and when she asks, “What are we going to do?” he enfolds her in an embrace as replies “We'll think of something.” However, as before, Maurice is not the one to find or perform the escape. In this case, Chip, who stowed away to return with Belle, is the one to save the day. He spies Maurice’s logging invention and sends it flying at the basement to chop down its wooden door (Figure 4.30). It is almost a disparagement that Maurice’s invention is the same one that now saves them. Where it was the reason Maurice left home, became lost, and subsequently imprisoned, in the hands of another, it becomes a means for freedom.
This scene also holds Maurice’s final words in the film. When the machine is flying forward, its axe gleaming, Maurice cries “Belle, look out!” and pulls her back protectively out of harm’s way. Perhaps this is Maurice’s heroic moment. When he sees his wood-cutting contraption barreling down, he can draw his daughter away from the danger he created. To the villagers, he is harmless, but upon his daughter he can have devastating effects. Henceforth, this small moment becomes, in a sense, his finest hour.

For the rest of the film, he stands in the background as his daughter goes forth to save the Beast and his enchanted servants. Following a recurring trend in the film, Belle is repeatedly not the cause of the dilemma but its solution. As her father frequently gets into the next bad situation, she runs out to rescue him. In contrast, Beaumont’s heroine is the one who unwittingly creates the trouble, not only by requesting a rose but by leaving the Beast and not returning within the designated time. He allots her one week to visit her family, explaining that if she does not return he will die of grief. However, while home, she allows her sisters to convince her to stay longer, unaware that they hope her “stupid beast will be furious when he sees that she has broken her promise, and maybe he’ll eat her up” (74). It is not until the tenth night when she dreams of the Beast, lying in the garden, half dead, that she returns to the castle. Disney’s Belle, on the other hand, makes no such arrangement with the Beast; he releases her freely. She only returns to the castle so soon because the villagers are on their way to kill him. Belle is not the catalyst behind her changing life, but she does step valiantly forward to endure each new venture. While Maurice sets the story in motion, it is Belle who creates its happy ending.
Rescue and Happily Ever After

Facing a new obstacle, Belle races off to the Beast’s castle with Maurice and Chip; meanwhile, Gaston has already arrived with the angry mob of villagers. Issuing a simple order to take what they want from the palace, he reminds them that “the beast is mine!” His desire for vengeance against the one who won Belle’s admiration drives him to vicious heights. It is just another example of why Gaston was incompatible for the heroine. Where she would sacrifice herself for another’s happiness, he would extract revenge. With this in his cold, vain heart, he climbs the castle stairs until discovering the Beast, and the two tumble out onto the balcony.

By the time Belle arrives, the enchanted servants have beaten the villagers and only Gaston and the Beast are still at arms. When she spies the Beast losing against Gaston high above her, she immediately sets off to help (Figure 4.31). Maurice does nothing to assist his daughter; indeed, he disappears for the rest of the fight. Belle alone must act to save the Beast, and even her appearance invigorates him. He soon has Gaston suspended over the edge of the rooftop, but feeling compassion towards his enemy, he sets Gaston back down. Like Belle, he is not a killer. He merely tells Gaston to leave as Belle ascends to the balcony. The Beast crosses the roof towards her, but their reunion is interrupted by Gaston stabbing the Beast in the back. Arching backwards in pain and an impending fall, the Beast knocks Gaston off balance and he plunges to his death instead (Figure 4.32).

31 Gaston views the Beast as such an animal that his reference to him lacks a formal title.
 Throughout the film, Gaston is portrayed as a selfish and callous individual. He wishes to be the dominant person in all his relationships—as illustrated in his associations with Lefou, the villagers, and Belle—and when he cannot achieve his desires, he sets out to remove or destroy what stands in his way—as demonstrated when he tries to have Maurice committed or attacks the Beast. His character shows a tendency towards violence and disruptive behavior. David Courtwright finds this same proclivity among American single men, those either lacking fathers or their own families. He tracks these social concerns in his book *Violent Land: Single Men and Social Disorder from the Frontier to the Inner City*. Summarizing part of Courtwright’s theories, Popenoe explains that “[y]oung unattached men tend to be more aggressive, violent, promiscuous, and prone to substance abuse; they are also more likely to die prematurely through disease, accidents, or self-neglect. They make up the majority of deviants, delinquents, criminals, killers, drug users, vice lords, and miscreants of every kind” (Daniels 43).

Gaston exhibits these same inclinations. He is the premier hunter of the village, he has no qualms about brutality, and he loves the attention he receives from the ladies of the town. He mocks those he considers inferior and plots to bring about their fall, such as when he tried to have Maurice committed to the asylum. Furthermore, he incites others
to violence and is more than willing to take another’s life as he sets out to kill the Beast. That his death is premature just enhances his connection to fatherless America and reemphasizes the dangers this condition holds for society.

With the antagonist gone, the story’s hero and heroine are able to move forward. Belle confesses her love to the dying Beast, allowing him to magically transform into the human prince he once was. As the other enchanted occupants of the castle also return to their true forms, Belle happily shares in the jubilation; in fact, she is given a central position next to the transformed Beast as they dance around on the ballroom floor. The castle’s occupants recognize Belle’s inner strengths and are grateful for them, compared to her father who seems to take her abilities for granted. Indeed, he has already been turned into a silent observer of the story’s end. This is clear when Chip asks his mother if Belle and the Beast will live happily ever after. Maurice is standing right beside them, but he makes no comment on his daughter’s future; Mrs. Potts is the one to say “Of course.” Maurice is already relegated to the side of the story and unable to verbally respond to others’ comments, even ones about his own family (Figure 4.33).

Figure 4.33: Maurice Is Relegated to a Silent Observer of His Daughter’s Triumphant Reunion with the Beast

Figure 4.34: Maurice’s Depiction Is Curiously Missing from the Stained Glass Window’s Happy Ending

To further distance Maurice from the happy ending, he is not even represented in the final picture of the film: a stained glass window (Figure 4.34). Belle and the
transformed Beast stand in the middle of the artwork, dressed in their finery; while, around them are various figures from the story. Maurice’s absence is hardly even noticeable, since so many other characters are represented. Perhaps it was an oversight by the animators, as if attesting to Maurice’s uselessness and insignificance, but his absence serves to show the change in Belle’s life. Maurice is no longer Belle’s only focal point. She no longer has to read about a life of happiness with magical adventures, she now has lived it—and is still living it, for the enchantment of love will stay with her. Undoubtedly, Maurice will still be in Belle’s life, but now she has others with whom to share her time and, not to mention, the responsibilities of attending to her father. No longer her father’s sole caretaker, her life will now hold more than this one substantial duty.

The final line of Beaumont’s tale could easily be adapted to Disney’s film. Instead of saying Beauty and the Beast marry and live together “in perfect happiness, for their marriage was founded on virtue” (78), the last word could be replaced with “equality.” Through the course of the story, Belle and the Beast have taken the necessary steps to ensure a balanced relationship, one that values and supports each other. As the film began with a song about Belle, now it ends with one about her and the Beast: “Tale as old as time, / Song as old as rhyme. / Beauty and the Beast” (Disney 170). Nowhere in the film is there a song about Maurice. Instead, as Downey explains, the “film ends with a jubilant rendition of ‘Beauty and the Beast,’ signifying relational fulfillment and mutual emancipation from needs made possible through the twin mechanisms of mutual concern and cooperative power sharing” (205). What lacked in Belle’s relationship with her father is found in her partnership with the Beast. Based in equality, their companionship
has the power to survive, and this seems a timely issue for the divorce-ridden, late-twentieth century of the United States.
Chapter Five:

Synthesis: What These Tales Signify in Relation to
the United States in the Late-Twentieth Century

Fairy tales are adapted to fit the unique needs of each society, and the changes in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* relate to the concerns of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. Both deliver a story of a single-parent family and end happily with the formation of a new couple, but the dynamics between the each father and daughter is different. Ariel is fighting against a strict, authoritarian father when she sets out on her journey to be with Eric. Belle is rescuing her weak, ineffectual father when she begins her adventure with the Beast. The difference in father types mirrors issues of the day as the concept of families was undergoing a change in America during the late-twentieth century. With a widespread case of absent fathers, many linked this to the increase in societal ills, such as violence and poor academic achievement. Combating such images, a more nurturing type of fatherhood was gaining acceptance as more men worked to raise their children alone. These changes in families and fatherhood can be seen in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, and their appearance can be interpreted as offering hope that from the single-parent homes of the 1980s, a new generation of nuclear families could arise.

**American Families through the Ages**

Families in the United States have transformed through the centuries, and briefly examining these changes will help one better understand the situation in the late-
twentieth century that produced such an important debate on fatherhood. Even before America gained its independence from the British, colonial fathers were the leaders of their families. Eirini Flouri states in *Fathering and Child Outcomes* that they “were the primary parent and had ultimate say in matters of the child” (1). By the industrial age in the nineteenth century, the distinction between fathers and mothers was even more ingrained as women were given the domestic sphere and men were sent out as the breadwinners, defining the private realm and public life for each (Hawes and Nybakken, *Family 6*). During World War II, many men left their homes to fight as women took their place in the workforce. In response, the early 1950s showed an attempt by Americans to regain a sense of idealism that celebrated prewar traditional families. Television programs thereby depicted fathers who set out each day for work and mothers who remained in the house playing the role of homemaker. In the words of Joseph Hawes and Elizabeth Nybakken in *Family and Society in American History*, “Americans sought to recreate the model middle-class family of the nineteenth century” (7).

With this came a backlash, as feminism gained momentum in the 1960s and some women were less content to play the traditional role of a stay-at-home mom. This movement coincided with other changes affecting the family. In his article “New Rules: Postwar Families (1955-Present)” published in the book *American Families*, Steven Mintz lists three contributing factors (Hawes and Nybakken 189-90). The cost of living went up, so more families sought additional sources of income, resulting in mothers entering the workforce. In other cases, the interest in education and advancement spurred women to want the fulfillment of a career in addition to being a mother. Even the progress in fertility control allowed more women to work outside the home. As a result,
the increase in employed mothers skyrocketed. Historian Robert Griswold states that “[i]n 1950, 28 percent of women with children ages six to seventeen worked for wages, but by the mid-1980s the percentage had climbed to almost 70 percent” (222).

As more mothers entered the workforce and shared in the economic responsibilities of the family, fathers were expected likewise to do more in the domestic sphere and help with household chores and childrearing. While some husbands accepted the change, others could not or would not adjust, thereby producing disgruntled wives. When this phenomenon is coupled with the rise in individualism, which focuses on the desires of individuals at the cost of group efforts, one of the reasons for the soaring divorce rate is clearer. The end result were figures declaring that “[m]ore than half of all marriages begun since the middle of the twentieth century now end in divorce” (Hawes and Nybakken, Family 7). With single-parent families becoming increasingly more common, what constituted a family had to be reconsidered as traditional structures were reconstituted.

It is this dramatic metamorphosis of the American family that prompted statements like this one from Mintz in 1991.

Over the past three decades, American family life has undergone a historical transformation as radical as any that has taken place in the last 150 years. As recently as 1960, 70 percent of all American households consisted of a breadwinner father, a housewife mother, and their children. Today, fewer than 15 percent of American households consist of a go-to-work dad, a stay-at-home wife, and the kids. (Hawes and Nybakken, American 184)
The changes only continued as demographers provided staggering numbers to the amount of children who would live in one-parent homes for some quantity of time before the age of 18, placing the proportion around 50% (Flouri 2; Benjamin Schlesinger 76). This statistic was expected to increase with projections that “nearly 70 percent of white children and 94 percent of black children born in 1980 will live with only one parent for part of their childhood” (Hawes and Nybakken, American 199).

With such an upheaval in the traditional concept of a family, the roles and relations between its components also had to undergo a shift. Many single mothers were tougher on their children following a divorce as they tried to fulfill the position of mother and father. Those fathers who received custody had to work hard to satisfy the physical and emotional needs of their children. And the kids had to adjust too, taking on more responsibility to help out around the home and figuring out how to respond to a single parent.

Most of these families were run by single mothers, the amount being 88% in 1984 as reported by Arthur Norton and Paul Glick in their article published in the journal Family Relations (10). The reasons behind this high number were extensive. Divorce was certainly a leading cause as “divorced mothers maintaining families increased by nearly 300%” (11) between 1970 and 1984. Another reason is the rise in unwed pregnancies, which jumped by 500% during those same years (11). Two other areas include widows and husbands who simply abandon their families (Daniels 2; Norton and Glick 11). It is with the realization that so many children were raised without male parents that specific attention must be given to the topic of absent fathers.
Fatherless America and Its Social Ills

David Blankenhorn states that the rise in fatherless families is “the most harmful demographic trend of this generation...[and] the engine driving our most urgent social problems” (1) in his book Fatherless America. It influences not only the development of children but also larger issues like violence. This phenomenon of absent fathers and its effects is an important issue and it connects back to Disney’s films. Whether or not the studio was intentionally reacting to fatherless families, the 1990s showed a string of animated features by Disney that depict father and daughter bonds. Besides The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast, there was Aladdin (1992), Pocahontas (1995), Mulan (1998), and Tarzan (1999). Even the films The Lion King (1994) and Hercules (1997) depict sons trying to connect with absent fathers. With such an overwhelming production of animated films on the subject, a closer look to fatherless families and its social repercussions is necessary.

Four separate events occurred in the summer of 1992 that point towards the omnipresence of paternal neglect in the United States—even to the point that it was part of election-year politics. Griswold notes them in his book Fatherhood in America: A History. First, Newsweek weighed in with a front cover and article dedicated to “Deadbeat Dads” in a May issue. Second, President George Bush gave a speech on the “disintegration of the two-parent family” (231). Third, Vice President Dan Quayle denounced the single mother arc in the television show Murphy Brown. And fourth, Bill Clinton vowed at the Democratic National Convention in July “to make delinquent fathers pay child support” (231). Even a Gallup Poll conducted in January of 1996 showed that 79% of “those surveyed agreed with the statement: ‘The most significant
family or social problem facing America is the physical absence of the father from the home” (Daniels 53).

Just how truly serious was, or is, this phenomenon? Considering recent studies, Mintz and Susan Kellogg were prompted to state that “two months following a divorce fewer than half the fathers see their children as often as once a week and, after three years, half the fathers do not visit their children at all” (227). Why are these dads ignoring their children? According to one sociologist, Frank Furstenberg, the answer lies in the connection between fatherhood and divorce. “[M]en tend to see marriage and fatherhood as a package, and that when the marriage ends, their sense of paternal responsibility wanes as well” (Griswold 232). The shocking truth is that many of these absent fathers are “alive, well, and perfectly capable of shouldering the responsibilities of fatherhood” (Daniels 34). For children, the knowledge that their fathers are somewhere nearby by but do not care is more devastating (Daniels 164). It is no wonder that sociologist David Popenoe says “it is decidedly worse for a child to lose a father in the modern, voluntary way than through death. The children of divorce and never-married mothers are less successful in life by almost every measure than the children of widowed mothers” (Daniels 34).

Judging the specific effects of absent fathers on children, however, can be a complicated road to travel. Case studies on absent fathers are not entirely conclusive since other factors tend to enter homes without male adults, such as a lower income and the mother having less time to spend with her children (Hamilton 19). However, at the same time, some may say these types of variables are still results of not having the father in the home. Similarly, the ages of the children at the time when the father leaves bring
varying conclusions, just as the quantity and quality of time he spent with them before his absence. In addition, the access of another adult male in the children’s lives can modify results (Hamilton 51). All the same, there is an ever-growing body of research on this topic, and its results show that the impact of father abandonment on children is both distressing and profound. The scope of the resulting effects reaches from within the home and out into society at large.

The list of documented, negative outcomes on children without fathers is staggering. Poor self-esteem, reduced academic achievement, lower attendance records, inferior cognitive ability, less aspirations for college, increased delinquency and deviant behavior are some of the effects (Amato 1032; Daniels 87; Hunt and Hunt 90). Psychological disorders, sleep disturbances, drug use, and teenage suicide continue the list (Flouri 10; Griswold 236). In “Growing Up Without a Father,” Sara McLanahan gives even more harmful impacts for these children. She says “they are twice as likely to drop out of high school, 2.5 times as likely to become teen mothers, and 1.4 times as likely to be idle—out of school and out of work—as are children who grow up with both parents” (Daniels 86). For Janet and Larry Hunt, father absence “means the loss of a male role model and possibly the necessary parental supervision and discipline required for normal gender-identity formation and character development” (91). The point is that children suffer emotionally, psychologically, socially, and economically when they are left fatherless, and they are without the moral development necessary to be upstanding citizens in society.

In addition to the effects on childhood development, increased violence and teen pregnancy are tied to the rise in absent fathers. In “Life Without Father,” Popenoe
reports that violent crime among juveniles increased 600% between 1960 and 1992 (Daniels 37), and psychologist David Lykken states “a boy raised without a father is nearly seven times more likely to end up in prison than a boy reared by both biological parents” (B1). When considering those who commit some of America’s most heinous crimes, “60 percent of rapists, 72 percent of adolescent murderers, and 70 percent of long-term prison inmates come from fatherless homes” (Daniels 41). Furthermore, the United States has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the industrialized world (Daniels 41), with 70% of those girls coming from homes without fathers (Lykken B1).

Some critics may try to lay the blame on areas other than absent fathers: the waning influence of religion, amplified commercialism, the swaying power of mass media, declining community involvement, and the increased availability of drugs and guns (Daniels 37). Admittedly, there is no guarantee that merely having a father in the home will keep a child from receiving poor educational scores or committing criminal acts. However, the rising trends of both absent fathers and the problems plaguing society point toward some connection. As Marshall Hamilton phrases it, “the most common tendency in statements about the father’s influence is to underestimate it” (145). Even if some critics disagree that fatherless homes generate social ills, this is still the message being sent to the public in the form of such alarming statistics.

**Fatherhood Movement and Changing Custody Laws**

Adjacent to this concern over the rise in absent fathers, there was an effort by some dads to be a more constant and positive influence on their children, and these attempts were even mimicked in the field of media entertainment. Maggie Gallagher
calls this phenomenon “father hunger,” as studios tried to fill society’s need for dads who cared. She says during the 1980s and 1990s of American culture there was a “sudden explosion of unlikely families in which a perplexing multiplicity of loving fathers care for motherless children” (Daniels 166). Listing a couple of television programs and films with single fathers only hints at the dramatic amount of them: *My Two Dads* (1987-90), *Full House* (1987-95), *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), and *My Father the Hero* (1994). Mintz reemphasizes that this change in media’s “images of the family mirror[ed] a much broader transformation of American family patterns” (Hawes and Nybakken, *American* 184), and this was a shift that had begun in the decades proceeding.

The fatherhood movement may have included a small number of men in the beginning, but they recognized the change to the nuclear family. With more mothers helping to earn the money, the traditional role of the father became nearly obsolete and “as a wealth of evidence suggests, millions of men recognize[d] this fact and want[ed] to play a more active part in child rearing” (Griswold 223). This movement began in the 1970s by liberals who wanted men to be more emotionally available. Its resulting organizations fought for fathers’ rights, helping to ultimately change divorce laws regarding custody, just as the legal definition of what it means to be a family had to adapt to reflect the change in society. “For,” as Griswold questions, “how could divorced men remain loving, committed new fathers and how could they gain the deep personal

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satisfactions that [come] with parenthood if courts routinely marginalized them in divorce settlements?” (261).

It was established during the industrial revolution that courts award custody to mothers believing her influence necessary for proper development in children (Benjamin Schlesinger 57; Smith and Smith 411). Few fathers contested this, but if they did, they had to prove the mother was unfit (Orthner, Brown, and Ferguson 430). Furthermore, fathers who did receive custody were usually of a privileged background, with a higher education and annual income. Gradually, however, such bias declined and courts have begun to consider lower- and middle-class fathers as viable guardians (Benjamin Schlesinger 76). Another development looked to the kids as judges waited to award custody until after hearing the wishes of the children and reading psychological reports (Hawes and Nybakken, Family 26). Some jurisdictions even chose joint custody so that mothers and fathers equally shared the duties of raising the children. Henceforth, over a decade time, the proportion of single parents who were fathers increased from 10% in 1980 to 15% in 1991 (Griswold 263). Still, it has been a slow change and there are more single mothers than fathers, but the feeling is that more and more fathers will receive sole custody of their children.

As fathers won more custody battles and programming mimicked that development through popular shows and films, Disney’s animated features appeared to follow the same trend. As a major contributor of family entertainment, it would make sense that the studio would try to adjust its stories to relate personally with its audience, and so at a time when the traditional concept of a family was eroding, Disney took the premise of a single-parent home and developed it for the motion picture market. It
showed two different fathers trying to raise their daughters alone, demonstrating the possible trials that could be encountered and offering hope that one can endure and triumph over them. The resolution of a nuclear family being formed at the end of the tales can then be interpreted as a wish by society to return to the traditional values of the past as the films proved popular with the public.

**Disney and the Interest in Fathers**

As the information above suggests, fatherhood was receiving growing attention in the United States in the late-twentieth century, both in professional literature and popular entertainment (Eggebeen and Uhlenberg 251). Given these social factors, it is surely no coincidence that at this time Disney released two films centering on single fathers and their daughters. Whereas before, fathers may have been considered peripheral to children’s development, since the mid-1980s, the role of the father and its importance has been a major theme in research (Flouri viii). Fairy tales, in general, already have some facet of family drama incorporated within them (Evetts-Secker 6), and Disney just needed to adapt that conflict to fit the current interests and concerns of America. Marina Warner states in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* that “[f]airy tales often attack received ideas…[and] champion lost causes” (415). Perhaps with the apprehension and change surrounding fathers, Disney saw a way to add its own message to the topic.

As Susan Hines and Brenda Ayres say in the introduction of *The Emperor’s Old Groove: Decolonizing Disney’s Magic Kingdom*, “the American family is central to the Disney enterprise” (Ayres 6). The studio has long established itself as family
entertainment, and many critics perceive it as reinforcing patriarchal notions. Hines and Ayres say Disney has a formula that “underscores the absolute necessity of the traditional, nuclear family” (Ayres 4). It uses this formula to soothe children and parents as the animated heroes and heroines “inevitably desire (more than anything else) a family” (Ayres 4), and this quest to obtain familial security “draws the storyboard for most of Disney’s film animation” (22). The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast both contain heroines who go on to form new families, and the success of the films suggests that the audience also finds the creation of nuclear families to be a happy and desirable ending. Similarly, when Disney tackled divorce in its two versions of The Parent Trap (1961 and 1998), the couples were reunited as love emerged triumphant. As Ayres explains it, in “Disney’s world, divorced people get back together because they should never have divorced in the first place” (Ayres 23). She says Disney is “putting to rights all of the wrongs under which our society staggers” (23).

This, of course, is not a new use for fairy tales. Jack Zipes explains that by the end of the nineteenth century, two of their crucial functions were to reinforce a patriarchal society and to lessen a child’s fears through the optimism of a happy ending (Fairy 74). Thus, it is not surprising that Disney employs two different narratives to show single fathers whose children grow up to succeed in life and achieve marital bliss. Such films encourage “children to believe that they will survive the loss of a parent,” whether through fictional death or factual divorce, and “will grow up and marry and have children of their own” (Ayres 21). Indeed, Disney’s animations commonly give the heroes and heroines the same dilemma: “they are missing effective parent figures” (Ayres 21). For Ariel and Belle, those individuals took the form of an overbearing father
and an ineffectual one, and even these two types of dads find a relation to the difficulties fathers faced during this time in the United States, namely downward mobility and the changing views of masculinity.

**Downward Mobility: Declining Income and Increasing Career Failure**

As Tony Chapman states in *Gender and Domestic Life: Changing Practices in Families and Households*, there has long been a “link between masculinity, employment and the imperative to succeed in the USA from the early to mid-twentieth century” (16). Griswold calls this idea of being the breadwinner a “great unifying element in fathers’ lives. Its obligations bind men across the boundaries of color and class, and shape their sense of self, manhood, and gender. Supported by law, affirmed by history, sanctioned by every element in society, male breadwinning has been synonymous with maturity, respectability, and masculinity” (2). However, by the latter half of the twentieth century, this long-standing mentality that men are the breadwinners of their families began to erode as women entered the workforce and feminism questioned its gender-based division of labor and domesticity. It suffered further with the gradual emergence of declining income and increasing career failure.

Prosperity is at the heart of the American dream. For many, that translates into financial increase, but what happens when the economy stops flourishing and incomes start dropping? Steven Greenhouse examined this harsh reality of decreased earnings in his article “The Average Guy Takes It On the Chin,” published in a 1986 issue of *The New York Times*. He shows that during the 1950s, incomes went up 3% a year. This means thirty-year-old men in 1949 could expect their earnings to increase 63% by the end
of a decade, and this is after the figures are adjusted for inflation. In contrast, thirty-year-old men in 1973 would see their income decline 1% over a decade’s time (F10). Greenhouse states that “[a]verage weekly earnings…have declined an astonishing 14.3 percent since 1973, after accounting for inflation” (F1). These figures translate into devastating facts for fathers in the 1980s. As Griswold puts it, the “rise in personal income, and hence the ability to support a family, that men took for granted in the post-World War II years no longer prevails” (222). Moreover, this reality is even more tragic when recognizing that career failures were increasing as well.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw this gradual emergence of career failures. It was not readily discussed in the beginning, perhaps because it was too demoralizing to initially admit, but soon studies on the subject began to surface. In more than one case, high-paid executives suddenly found themselves unemployed and without other available openings at the corporate level they were accustomed. In *Falling from Grace: Downward Mobility in the Age of Affluence*, Katherine Newman cites two studies that found 27% of unemployed executives still had not found a comparable position after six months and “nearly half of the displaced managers who do find new jobs go outside the managerial and professional occupations in order to obtain them” (43). When this state of affairs is tied to the notion that men are to be the breadwinners, it takes on an even more distressing position. It is no wonder that with such prevalent cases of downward mobility came the need to redefine what it means to be a man.

The result was for many men to try and be better fathers. If they could not “rule the roost economically” (Chapman 209), they could at least try to improve their relations with their children. This is not necessarily an easy thing to achieve, as Richard and Craig
Smith explain. “Males within our culture have little opportunity to develop the parenting skills that will aid them in being effective parents” (412). They point to the socialization of males that avoids activities like “playing house” and attaches negativity to boys that are nurturing and empathetic. “In light of such expectations for boys, it is understandable that a father is often ill-prepared for parenting and feels uncomfortable with the idea of being loving and nurturant [sic] with his children” (412). Helen Mendes expands on this saying “males are generally not expected to care for children and, consequently, this aspect of their family life education is usually neglected” (444). Moreover, fathers who are more occupied with their career pursuits than with their families will have a harder time satisfying their children’s emotional needs when they do begin to try. This last idea is particularly enlightening when connected to the father in The Little Mermaid as he tries to be a more involved parent with Ariel.

Triton, the powerful king of the sea, is akin to a modern high-paid executive whose job also comes with great power and responsibility. Triton is consumed enough with his role as the “breadwinner” that he does not know what his youngest daughter is doing in her spare time. Even when he learns of her dallying with humans and their artifacts, he sends another to supervise her, allowing Trion to instead concentrate on his duties as king. He is ill-prepared to manage his daughter and fails to recognize her individual interests. He uses force to try and convince her to leave the human world behind, but his intense tactics actually push her further away as she heads to the authority and power of another. Before he can reconnect with his daughter, he has to demonstrate his love rather than his strong arm as he sacrifices himself to the sea witch. When he
makes that transition, he is able to better connect with his family and ultimately help the
story’s heroes achieve a happy ending.

Like the shift in American society, Triton had to start investing more in the
emotional needs of his family than in the physical duties of his occupation. Through
personally involvement, he learned to recognize when to rescue a daughter and when to
set her free. Parents in the audience can also discover the same insight. Perhaps they too
have struggled to meet their children’s needs. Maybe they notice similar tendencies
within themselves to unduly command compliance from their kids. Triton’s efforts
would then remind them that an essential part of parenting is listening and observing, that
such elements are key to understanding what inwardly prompts their children’s outward
behavior. If the parents learn to do this successfully, then they can work with their
children to overcome the obstacles of life and thereby enjoy the rewards of unified
cooperation.

At the other end of the spectrum are those fathers who lost their jobs. Newman
relates an experience of one such man and explains that “the first step in the symbolic
stripping of his identity” was admitting to his family that he was unemployed. By doing
so, “he redefined himself in his family’s eyes as someone unable to exert control over his
own life and, by extension, the circumstances of theirs” (51). This feeling of
powerlessness and detachment extended beyond the family and into society. As one man
phrased it, “All of a sudden everybody stops talking to you. It’s like a disease…Friends,
associates, best friends…they start calling you less or stop calling you altogether. People
don’t know what to say…they don’t know how to talk to you” (59). When we connect
this to the predicament of Belle’s father in *Beauty and the Beast*, the result is revealing as we see Maurice struggle to exert control and gain respect.

Maurice does not hold a job, like an underpaid or laid-off employee. He loves his daughter but is unable to support her with any of his failed inventions. With his downward mobility is a decline in his sense of masculinity. Unlike Triton who is physically robust and confident, Maurice is diminutive and scatterbrained. His tinkering with machines may be an attempt at domestic masculinity, just like do-it-yourself projects were when they erupted in American homes during the 1980s (Hawes and Nybakken, *Family* 295). Maurice is unable to assert control over his own life or his daughter’s, and he is an outcast among the villagers. Throughout the film, he appears lost as he tries to find a place in society and authority at home. Similarly, many men whose status as a breadwinner disappeared faced the same confusion as they tried to “reconfigure perceptions of themselves” (Chapman 175). As Griswold states it, “Buffeted by powerful demographic, economic, and political changes, fatherhood in American culture is now fraught with ambiguity and confusion. Not surprisingly, so, too, are fathers themselves” (244). Maurice is an undirected father who undergoes a troubled time of adjustment and endures failed attempts at protecting his daughter. He wants to fulfill his role as a parent, but he cannot seem to find a suitable way to do so. He is not as successful as Triton at reconnecting with his daughter, but his relationship with Belle is also not filled with as much quarreling or conflict. Instead, Maurice learns when to withdraw and let his daughter fulfill her own dreams.

I am not suggesting that unemployed fathers hamper the development of their children; what is presented in *Beauty and the Beast* is a caricature of an extreme situation.
What I am asserting, however, is that parents, like children, can learn from such
depictions. Feeling inadequate is not uncommon for a parent, and watching Maurice fail
at his attempts to help his daughter may serve to soothe parents as they watch the heroine
ultimately conquer the trials before her. Sometimes, despite the best of intentions, a
parent’s endeavors are futile, and it is up to the children to find their own means of
success.

In both *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, the fathers do love their
children and are trying, in their own ways, to raise good, upstanding daughters. It is clear
they want secure futures for their girls, even if they are occasionally misguided in their
attempts to reach that end. However, before the story’s finish, the families are united in
the joy that a new family is being born as Ariel joins with Eric and Belle with the Beast.
Ultimately, it did not matter what style of father the girls had, for each strove to do right
by his daughter. One may say Disney simply chose these two types of dads for their
contrast, but I find a strong argument in the similarities they hold and the developments
in the United States at the time—not only in the trends of downward mobility but also in
the changing views of masculinity.

**Changing Views of Masculinity between the 1980s and 1990s**

The way males were being represented in film during this time was undergoing a
transformation. Susan Jeffords discusses this in her article “The Curse of Masculinity”
which appears in *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*.
She uses Arnold Schwarzenegger as her example, showing how his macho characters
softened into family-orientated men between the 1980s and 1990s. Originally from Austria, Schwarzenegger’s title role in *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) brought the bodybuilder cinema fame. He followed that up with a string of action hero films: *Conan the Destroyer* (1984), *The Terminator* (1984), *Red Sonja* (1985), *Commando* (1985), *Raw Deal* (1986), *Predator* (1987), and *The Running Man* (1987). In 1990, however, the film *Kindergarten Cop*, took “one of the 1980s’ most muscular and hardened heroes” (Bell, Haas, and Sells 161) and showed his transition into an “emotionally whole and physically healed man” who “wants nothing more than to be a father, not a warrior/cop, after all” (163). Jeffords goes on to state that *Kindergarten Cop* “anticipates the endings of many 1991 films that are resolved through a man’s return to his family” and “identifies how the issues of manhood are to be addressed and defined in the next decade” (Bell, Haas, and Sells 163). She lists examples like *Regarding Henry* (1991), *The Fisher King* (1991), and *City Slickers* (1991) that exhibit this change.

Jeffords associates this transformation in male roles with the Beast, saying he represents the reformed macho man coming to terms with his emotional side. For her, he is the “one who can transform himself from the hardened, muscle-bound, domineering man of the ’80s into the considerate, loving, and self-sacrificing man of the ’90s” (Bell, Haas, and Sells 170). However, I believe her argument can be extended to apply to the fathers offered between the two films. King Triton is a powerful man who, like his 1980s-film counterparts, finds it “necessary to enter into these violent confrontations” because of his position as a leader (Bell, Haas, and Sells 164). Conversely, Maurice is a kind father who holds no position of influence in society. The transformation between

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33 Arnold Schwarzenegger did not stop playing action heroes, but the appearance and frequency of more sympathetic and comedic roles definitely increased after 1988.
the characters, therefore, takes an imposing and forceful father and replaces him with one that is sensitive and caring.

Many of the historical and social changes I have discussed above contributed to this shifting view of masculinity. Another reason, however, is tied to the politics of the Reagan era. Jeffords explains that “the hard-edged masculinity that had been so closely affiliated with the foreign policy angles of the Reagan era would now shift toward domestic policies, emphasizing the family and personal values over market achievements” (Bell, Haas, and Sells 161). With an emphasis on families, a movement for sensitive men emerged as stoic masculinity was replaced with vulnerability and openness (O’Connell 25). Single fathers even “indicated that their attitudes toward discipline had changed and had become more nurturing and less rigid” (Smith and Smith 413). This parallels the difference in the parenting styles of Triton and Maurice, as authoritarian control shifted to a more laid-back, caring approach. The films therefore can be interpreted as tracing the changes in single fathers’ methods of parenting and discipline.

The change in masculinity not only affected fathers but daughters as well. Henry Biller and Stephan Weiss explain that fathers make a significant impact on feminine identification: “The particular character of the father-daughter relationship appears to affect profoundly feminine development and to have pervasive and lasting effects upon a girl’s personality and social adjustment” (90). Not only do girls learn from their fathers how to relate with other men, but it can also determine their degree of femininity. Marshall Hamilton describes how “fathers of highly feminine girls were more masculine than the fathers of the less feminine girls” (89). This means that if the father possesses an
excessive amount of the qualities commonly associated with masculinity, such as physical strength and emotional unavailability, his daughter will exhibit a comparable level of femininity in areas like her appearance and conduct; the reverse is also true. This can be seen in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. Triton’s daughter is highly feminine, from her lustrous locks to her flirtatious behavior. She quickly pursues Eric, easily employing feminine wiles to gain his affection. In contrast, Maurice’s daughter is more casual about her femininity. Her main dress is a simple blue frock that is not especially designed to reveal curves. Her hair is usually pulled back rather than flowing across her shoulders. And she does not set out to attract a man, but instead aims to avoid a particular one.

Furthermore, the fathers seem to determine other characteristics of their daughters. Triton is commanding and Ariel is likewise headstrong. He is quick to anger and she is similarly impetuous. He wants to shelter her from the dangers of the outside world and thereby has a daughter who appears young and naïve. She also exhibits more selfishness than Belle who has had to care for her father. Belle is subsequently more considerate and aware of others as she makes up for her father’s preoccupied manner. She is nurturing since he is the one needing to be protected from the troubles beyond his workroom. She is intelligent compared to her father’s lack of common sense. Where he is nearly inexperienced with how the world works, she is mature and able to step up to each new trial. It is noteworthy that the shift in masculinity affected both the fathers and daughters in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. That these changes find parallels to American society makes them even more significant.
Conclusion

The meaning of fairy tales is like a “chameleon in that it shifts with time and culture” (Beauty xiv), explains Betsy Hearne. “There is no question that a story’s sociohistorical context influences the selection and detail of its telling” (Beauty 7), as “[e]ach teller/interpreter recreates the tale anew” (Beauty xiv). At a time when family life was changing in the United States, Disney adapted the narratives of two fairy tales to reflect the anxieties, challenges, and aspirations of American culture. Emerging as “a central storyteller in our society,” Disney aims “its messages at families with children. And families have responded with overwhelming acceptance of Disney products and, by implication, Disney messages” (Ward 2). This may be daunting to those who work on these projects, as expressed in the words of screenwriter Linda Woolverton: “When you take on a Disney animated feature, you know you’re going to be affecting entire generations of human minds” (Kilpatrick 37). Chronicling those effects is a difficult task, but we do know that The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast resonated with the public as they secured places in American hearts and homes. These stories make us feel “we are all part of a universal community with shared values and norms, that we are all striving for the same happiness” (Zipes, Fairy 5). If so, the future desired can be interpreted as the creation of nuclear families founded on equal partnerships as society works to rise above the devastating effects of divorce and absent fathers. As Warner affirms, fairy tales are more than simple stories for children; “they can be vehicles of the grimmest realism, expressing hope against all the odds with gritted teeth” (225).

Through the course of this thesis, I have shown how the concerns of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s can be found within The Little Mermaid and Beauty and
the Beast. Using a genre that adjusts to the needs of each generation, Disney produced two adaptations of fairy tales that ultimately reflect some of the major changes in American families. As divorce increased and the number of children raised without fathers skyrocketed, some dads challenged the tenet that the “natural thing” for at least a century had been for mothers to rear children, fathers to support them” (Griswold 244). These men became single parents and strove to satisfy the various needs of their children. Perhaps they were not always fully successful, but their efforts were noted. As Josephine Evetts-Seeker says, “through error comes wisdom; the fathers’ mistakes are the windows through which new and unexpected possibilities appear, often initiating a girl’s most important adventures” (6).

As the character of fatherhood changed, uncertainty crept in, but with this came the potential to evolve. Both The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast illustrate that while there is “no simple equation, no single map,” every parent and child “must create their own relationship” (Evetts-Seeker 7). However, if both are committed to finding a better way together, the potential for a brighter future is possible. There are, of course, other interpretations that can be gathered from these stories, for, as Bruno Bettelheim asserts, “fairy tales, like all true works of art, possess a multifarious richness and depth that far transcend what even the most thorough discursive examination can extract from them” (19). Nevertheless, the connections that can be derived between the single-parent circumstances of The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast and the familial issues of the United States at the time work together to demonstrate social concerns of the day. As the heroines of the films go on to form new families, the overwhelming success of the films suggests that the audiences also believe the formation of nuclear families to be the
desirable goal. These types of challenges and aspirations can also be seen in the animated features that Disney produced over the next decade, as characters like Jasmine from *Aladdin* (1992) and Jane from *Tarzan* (1999) faced single-parent families and emerged victorious with a potential spouse beside them. It seems that despite declarations of modernity and endeavors to be progressive, the majority of the American public still wants the ideals of the past. Anxiety over rising divorce rates and changing issues of fatherhood may have prompted this realization, but as Bettelheim affirms, recognizing this is a start, a beginning to an “understanding of ourselves and of the world” (15). And once we know our concerns, we can embark on a journey to turn our fears into our triumphs.


