

The Rituals of Making Magic: Disney Films Through the Lens of Turner

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Abstract

Disney movies consist of timeless tales in which the main characters go on a personal journey to break away from the everyday constraints of life to eventually discover their true identity or destiny. These stories usually come to a close after the mental or physical transformation of the characters. According to Victor Turner, these characters spend most of their movie in the transitional phase known as liminality, in which their status is ambiguous until they figuratively cross over the threshold from their original station to obtain their true status in society. Utilizing the stages of Turners' theory as a reference point, this paper will apply the phases of liminality to the plots of various Disney movies, compare the commonalities among the main characters, and contrast their final status in society. Within the context of liminality, a more holistic view of these stories can be applied and a deeper understanding of the characters can be analyzed beyond the passive similarities which are apparent in all Disney movies.

There is the element of magic in the films from Walt Disney Studios. This magic is not merely represented by sorcery and spells, but also in our ability to relate to the characters and how their stories unfold. No matter what outrageous situations the main characters must overcome, there are always elements that we may connect to our own lives and emotions. The freedom that Rapunzel experiences in *Tangled* is relatable to anyone who has grown up and left their childhood home behind. Everyone has wondered what they would do if they had three wishes like Aladdin. This simple reason is why these particular stories persist in the popular culture of today through films, books, television, and other formats and still maintain their relevancy in spite of the fact that their origins stretch far back into time. This paper will apply both anthropological and theoretical lenses in an attempt to explain the various positions of the aforementioned characters within the plot of their stories, as well as the overarching familiarity of the stories and their persisting relatability and reverence within the context of society.

According to Joseph Campbell, the pedagogical function of all stories is to impart moral wisdom to the listeners while simultaneously utilizing the themes of superstition, magic, or nostalgia to subtly mask these lessons of morality (Campbell, *The Flight of the Wild Gander* 1951). Utilizing this lens, traditional tales or fables were shared orally at first for this purpose. In this day and age it is not uncommon to rewrite or reinvent these classic tales in other mediums; their primary function is for modern forms of entertainment. Although their original teachings are sometimes lost or buried deep within their plots, at the heart of these stories are characters who must successfully navigate through the various stages of life and this is the main reason why they resonate so soundly with audiences to this day (Campbell, *The Flight of the Wild Gander* 1951). According to the lens of Campbell, morality is always embedded within the plot of Disney films, even if further analysis is required to understand their deeper meanings.

In contrast to the views of Campbell, the anthropological theory of Liminality focuses on the ritualistic aspects apparent in all Disney films. The anthropology of Victor Turner is based in the study of rituals as well as the individuals who partake in them. By utilizing this lens to view Disney films, the motivations and reactions of the characters regarding their various situations are more easily understood. The liminal stage is described as a threshold and is categorized as the position of the participant on the outskirts of society throughout the ritual process (Turner, *The Ritual Process* 1969). Immediately following their introduction, the Disney characters experience the liminal stages set forth by Turners' theory: Breach, Crisis, Redressive

Action, and Reintegration (Turner, *Anthropology of Performance* 1987). Within the realm of Disney films, the characters more often than not experience their rituals in the form of magical transformations and the obtainment of a higher status. A comprehensive explanation of the aforementioned phases will commence, followed by three examples that illustrate how this theory can translate into the various worlds established by Walt Disney Studios.

The first phase of the theory of Liminality, known as Breach, is the separation of the participants away from the norm of society (Turner, *Anthropology of Performance* 1987). Turner himself believed this phase is quite contagious, and this appears to be true in the films of Walt Disney Studios although there is no direct interaction between the realms of individual films. All characters are striving, wishing or waiting for something when their stories begin, and these objectives can only be completed by usual and sometimes extreme attempts by the characters as they endeavor to improve their situations.

The second phase of the theory is Crisis, which is categorized as a widening of the breach as well as the possibility of transformation of the present situation or status of the participants (Turner, *Anthropology of Performance* 1987). Walt Disney Studios take great allowances so that their characters almost always transform by magical means because it is a great visualization for this phase. A great example of this phase would be the classic transformation of Cinderella, so that she may attend the ball. Transformations usually do coincide with a greater separation from the norms of society, although they are not always permanent and may require extra magic.

The third phase is known as Redressive Action, which consists of resolving the separation from the norm and restoring peace (Turner, *Anthropology of Performance* 1987). In Disney films, this is the climax of the story when all the secrets of the characters are exposed and they are forced to come to terms with their original motivations for wanting change. Along with self-examination and reflection, this is also when the characters tend to experience the most personal growth and become more self-assured.

The fourth and final phase of Liminality is known as Reintegration, in which a new status is bestowed upon the participants and they emerge back into society (Turner, *Anthropology of Performance* 1987). In fairy tales, the main characters usually receive a socially recognizable and respectable status, more often than not accompanied by a spouse. This stereotypical ending is becoming less common in the world of Walt Disney Studios as they continually modernize their image and promote the independence, happiness, and self-reliance of their characters, and ultimately, their audience.

To simplify the theory of Liminality into a single phrase, the participants begin in one stage, undergo some form magical transformation, and emerge back into society better than their previous situation. Generally speaking, this theory is very useful in the analysis and interpretation of Disney films, due to the ritualistic tendencies of their plots, the characters of which experience Liminality and encompass some if not all of the four phases of the theory at some point during their film. Below are three examples that contain all four phases of this theory and illustrate the ease with which this theory can be applied.

The fable *Mulan* fits well into the aforementioned category, although it shares little similarity to its origins. In the Disney version, Mulan breaches the norms of society by running away from home and joining the imperial army in the place of her father (Bancroft and Cook 1998). Before leaving, she undergoes a physical transformation to impersonate a male soldier. She returns home after her phase of Redressive Action, when she is personally thanked by the emperor of China for saving him, the city, and the country from the invading Huns. She is then reintegrated back into society as a daughter along with the added bonus of achieving

honor for her family. Although this rather inconsistent rendition does not hold true to the actual history of the Chinese fable, it could be argued that the story was updated to exemplify the modern views that women are capable of independence and recognition within their lifetime.

In contrast to this, the film *Tangled* is an updated adaptation of the classic Rapunzel story. Campbell would argue that classic tales are constantly rewritten and updated in an effort to maintain their relevancy in modern times (Campbell, *The Flight of the Wild Gander* 1951). In this recent retelling, Rapunzel breaches the norm by leaving her tower. Her mental transformation slowly plays out throughout the course of the movie as she goes on a grand adventure, discovers the kingdom, and falls in love for the first time. Redressive Action happens when she confronts the evil witch who originally locked her in the tower. In the end, she is reintegrated into society as the lost princess and daughter of the king and queen (Greno and Howard 2010). In this version of the classic tale, Rapunzel spends most of her time on the journey, and thus in the liminal state before her reintegration. Campbell would argue that this also coincides with the underlying themes of Rapunzel; her story teaches self-discovery and the importance of stepping outside of one's comfort zone.

Aladdin unfolds a bit differently than the other films chosen, and this serves to exemplify the fact that the phases of Liminality may happen in any order (Turner, *Anthropology of Performance* 1987). *Aladdin* begins as a lowly thief with nothing but grand ambition. His breach is in his discovery of the lamp. He undergoes several transformations as he utilizes his wishes in an attempt to impress a princess. *Aladdin* is forced to reintegrate back to his original status due to the fact that his wishes only temporarily placed him into high society and thus he was not effective in procuring a permanent status. In this version, *Aladdin* utilizes his last wish to release the genie which effectively symbolizes his Redressive Action and *Aladdin* ultimately marries the princess and achieves the status of prince after all (Clements and Musker 1992). It appears there are unspoken rules in Disney films that ensure happy endings for the main protagonists. *Aladdin* definitely steps away from the traditional order of Liminality, but he also shows the most personal growth out of the chosen examples. Although he did not permanently receive the status he originally intended, the story of *Aladdin* teaches us that perseverance and bravery will ultimately be rewarded with a happy ending.

The element of magic is present within all the above examples though it has not been previously mentioned in all of their synopses. A magical genie who grants wishes is paramount to the story of *Aladdin* and serves as an underlying presence in all versions of the story. Rapunzel has magical hair that contains the power to heal, and serves as the justification for her imprisonment in the tower (Greno and Howard 2010). Mulan receives aid from her ancestors in the form of Mushu, a tiny dragon, who serves as her companion and guide throughout her adventure (Bancroft and Cook 1998). Even if the original stories or legends lack any form of magic, Disney films always manage to implement certain magical elements into their films. Turner himself believed that the presence of magic is symbolic of power and serves to hold the audience of the ritual captive (Turner, *Anthropology of Performance* 1987). There is no denying that Walt Disney Studios utilize magic in this way as it serves as a predictable and effective transition between the ritualistic phases of Liminality within their individual plots.

Magical companions represent another important and integral component to the plots of Disney films, according to the literary lens of Campbell, who states that guidance is offered in the form of a protective figure who offers supernatural aid (Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces* 1949). This mystical aid is apparent in the above examples in the form of Mushu and Genie. In spite of their magical attributes, both of these supernatural companions maintain humanistic qualities and goals. The Genie seeks freedom from his imprisonment in the lamp (Clements and Musker 1992). Mushu seeks to be reinstated to his previous role as guardian to Mulan's family (Bancroft and Cook 1998). Rapunzel also has a companion in the form of

a chameleon named Pascal (Greno and Howard 2010). Although Pascal does not possess any magical attributes, except for the silent communication for which Disney animals are known, he does offer advice to Rapunzel throughout her adventure and thus fulfills the role of guide set forth by Campbell.

Walt Disney Studios maintain their originality while simultaneously utilizing established formulas for the plots of their films. The settings of the above examples are diverse and based on tales from China, Arabia, and Germany; other Disney films take place all around the globe. It is also apparent that the Disney characters begin their stories in parallel situations, and overall the characters ultimately experience similar periods of personal growth. Turner would reason that Disney films choose to utilize these ritualistic experiences and phases throughout their films because they are a reflection of real life situations (Raybin 1990). Thus, the representation and perpetuation of the theory of Liminality in the chosen medium of film is a direct reason why these stories are comparable by default.

Campbell would agree with this analysis but his reasoning would differ slightly from Turner. Campbell believes all stories are inherently parallel because they are, in essence, the story of mankind with minor differences to their plots to teach different parables and lessons (Campbell, *Hero with a Thousand Faces* 1949). Turner's theory is based on the performance of the ritual but Campbell focuses on the interpretation and the original and intended moral of the story. No matter which lens is ultimately true, there is no denying the similarities of Disney films function as a way to draw in different crowds due to their relatability among audiences in spite of ages, situation, and gender.

The goals and emotions of the characters are all superficially diverse but, at their foundation, they are all motivated by the desire for change. Turner would say the motivations of these characters are reflective in the sense that they have decided to change themselves (Turner, *Anthropology of Performance* 1987). As a result of these factors, the stories are left open-ended and thus their stories are capable of continuing on after the credits of the film (Pavel 1990). This marketability is also reflected in the work ethic of Walt Disney Studios and serves as a vehicle to continue the stories of these characters with movie sequels and mini-episodes. Another aspect pointed out by Turner is that rituals cease to maintain their meaning if they are not continually relatable to their audience (Pavel 1990). This could be a possible explanation why the formula of Walt Disney Studios remains constant and competitors try to duplicate this "Disney Magic" when writing and selling their own films.

In conclusion, utilizing the anthropological theory of Turner and the lens of Campbell as a reference will ultimately deepen our understanding of various Disney films. Although Walt Disney Studios may sometimes appear to be outlandish in their versions of classic tales, this helps to maintain or encourage relevancy with modern audiences. The classic use of magic by most, if not all, of the characters is perpetuated to mask the transitional phases of Liminality in a way that is ironically inconspicuous within the world of Walt Disney Studios. For this reason, a whimsical level of magic is maintained in all films and generally expected by modern audiences. Disney characters are expected to overcome hardship and persevere in the face of adversity so that they may earn their happy ending. The fact that all the main characters go through their stages of Liminality and usually arrive at the end of their story as royal, rich and famous is, in and of itself, quite magical.

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