Into The Woods By Stephen Sondheim: Film Analysis

One of the most memorable and undeniably iconic names of musical theatre is the composing great, Stephen Sondheim. Throughout his time in the industry, he has teamed with the librettist James Lapine to produce a number of successful shows as seen by their abundance of awards including Sondheim's 8 Tony Awards, the most of any composer. After their success of Sunday in the Park with George (1984), the team began formulating a new show based on the concept of fairytales. In true Sondheim fashion it was sprinkled with the dark twist of reality after being based off the fairytales written by the Grimm Brothers. And so Into The Woods was born, the story that follows the magical journey of some of the most well known fairytale characters and what happens when our wildest wishes come true. Classic fairytale characters were bought to the stage for this production; Cinderella who wishes to attend the ball, Little Red Riding Hood who wishes to visit her grandma, Jack and the Beanstalk who wishes to not sell his cow, Milky-White and Rapunzel who wishes to see the outside world, all face their trials and tribulations on the Broadway stage. This production revolved around a new story created by Sondheim and Lapine. A baker and his wife, bargain with a witch to reverse the curse placed on their family stopping their ability to have a child, therefore to achieve their own wish, must cause havoc in the other stories. Throughout the performance, all characters are driven by their individual wishes as they believe they will be forever fulfilled, if only they could reach their 'happily ever after'. In a show with multiple plots and characters running simultaneously Sondheim and Lapine successfully hold the story together through the detailed score (_,_)?. This essay will analyse Sondheim's iconic use of the dark and harsh reality of life as presented in Into The Woods through his use of musical motifs to show the impact of the woods on the characters and in particular, Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, and Jack, and how their wishes fuel and eventually end the character's stories.

In Into The Woods, Sondheim expertly uses the prologue to introduce the characters into his universe and set up the story and the wishes the characters all want to achieve. From the first sound the audience hears on stage they already know exactly what's in store with the stereotypical and 'comforting' beginning of "Once upon a time". The main motif commonly recognised as the 'Wish' motif is introduced immediately with Cinderella stating those two magical, and unbeknownst to the audience, life changing words for the characters. This short motif consists of two notes in ascending in a Major 2nd interval (see Fig.1), showing the optimism that the characters feel in the prologue thinking of their biggest dreams before facing the harsh reality and truth that comes along with getting what you think you want. Cinderella, Jack, The Baker and Baker's Wife, Jack's Mother and Little Red proceed to sing this motif when introducing themselves to the song and story.

Although this moment may seem insignificant, this motif is highly featured throughout the entire show's score and at moments is the foundation for whole songs like the first notes of Cinderella at the Grave, Hello Little Girl and A Very Nice Prince. The bouncy underscoring for this moment beginning and repeated in the prologue was formulated particularly by Sondheim. In an interview with the composer in Into The Woods, An MTI Conversation Piece with Sondheim and Lapine, he stated that the aim was,

"... to reflect musically what it means to take a journey. The number starts quite steadily with a

steady motion but as Little Red sings, “Into the woods to where I am expected ma’am, into the woods to grandmother’s house” the accompaniment becomes more galumphing and slightly off-centre when accented correctly”.

This expertly emphasises the slight suspicion when it comes to the idea of the woods and what they hold, something is not quite right in the woods. This is further articulated at 11:16 - 11:26 in the 1988 cast recording, ‘No need to be afraid there, there’s something in the glade there’ and followed by dissonant and unsettling brass to further push the hidden darkness that the woods hold, yet to be unravelled.

The second poignant motif is introduced when the Witch enters for the first time in the Prologue. This 5 note motif (see Fig. 2) is followed by the fast-paced patter written to both entertain and educate the audience about the background of the Witch and her connection with the Baker and Baker’s Wife in the show. In this she explains how when the Baker’s mother was pregnant his father stole from her garden, in particular her precious beans.

In this section Sondheim’s underlying dark and harsh reality is hinted at when the Witch describes how the Baker’s father pillaged her ‘garden’, using words such as “robbing... raping... rooting... raiding... ripping”. This abrasive and violent language insinuates that the Baker’s father possibly assaulted the Witch, especially when she furthermore states, “I should have laid a spell on him right there.” She then tells him how he has a sister she received in return for the thievery, and left a curse stating that his ‘family tree will always be a barren one’.

This motif is played to announce the Witch’s presence in the prologue and is the only motif not to be introduced by voice (_,_). The first time the audience hears this, it is played in a minor and more dissonant way to later in the show. Thus successfully setting up the negative connotations associated with the Witch, and also the dangerous magic the beans secretly withhold. The Witch proceeds to inform the Baker that if he wishes to reverse the curse he will need to find four items, “One: the cow as white as milk. Two: the cape as red as blood. Three: the hair as yellow as corn. Four: the slipper as pure as gold”. With these four items memorised, the couple head into the woods along with the other characters to pursue their wishes regardless of the cost.

The Wish motif is easily followed throughout Act 1 with the majority of the songs beginning with a Major 2nd. As the character’s begin their journey, Cinderella is first to face the question that is the underlying theme of the whole act. She travels into the woods to visit her mother’s grave which has since become a giant tree. Cinderella At The Grave features the wish motif in the first two notes she sings and is further in a spoken tone at 0:22 of the 1988 cast recording. This is the impetuous for her mother’s spirit to ask back,

“Do you know what you wish? Are you certain what you wish is what you want? If you know what you want, then make a wish. Ask the tree and you will have your wish.”

This is the first time one of the characters is asked about their wish and if what they want is right, but this question and the weight it carries is easily brushed aside by Cinderella to achieve her wish. The audience then continues to follow her journey to after the ball where she ponders about her night in A Very Nice Prince and later again in On The Steps on the Palace both numbers continuing to feature the Wish motif as the first notes. Both of these songs show the continuous change in Cinderella as she openly chooses to not be forthright to the Prince and

the townsfolk at the ball by disguising who she really is and deciding to run away instead. This becomes problematic as she goes back to the palace's ball three times while being indecisive after being so insistent about wanting that wish in particular. This becomes troublesome to other's lives in the story as she becomes more conniving and crafty when we see her in On The Steps on the Palace, choosing to leave a shoe for the Prince. This juxtaposes the way she talked about herself in the Prologue and Cinderella at the Grave at 0:11 "I've been good and i've been kind" showing that her time in the woods and having her wish has changed her, beginning to twist her into someone different.

Another moment where the Wish motif strongly presents Sondheim's harsh reality, is as Little Red travels into the woods, only to be met by the Big Bad Wolf along the way. This Wish Major 2nd interval carries a dark and sinister meaning when sang by a predator to his prey in Hello, Little Girl. This contrasts with the Wish motifs heard earlier in the show filled with optimism, and brings to light the kind of characters and creatures that lurk in the woods. Therefore, foreshadowing the kind of downfall and change of morals the 'good' characters face the longer they linger in the woods (_,_).

Little Red is quite an innocent child before the woods and the wolf as we later see her not only having skinned the wolf but wearing his pelt as a cloak whilst brandishing a knife.

I know things now the 'scary' B section begins with a M2 in 'But he drew me close' (go on to mention the change to her behaviour once she escapes the wolf and kills him and how it shows in know things now)

The Bean motif is presented in the score of Into The Woods depending on which character's story is being told (_,_). This is specifically crafted by Sondheim to show the hidden importance of the magic beans in the storyline. The majority of the problems in the musical are created by the beans after they were stolen by the Baker's father (_,_). This is shown through the strong correlation between the musical motif and the storyline motif: the beans create problems for each character and when this effects the character's storyline, the Bean motif becomes a detail in that character's song. This is most prominent in the way this motif is featured throughout Jack's, Rapunzel's and the Witch's storyline (_,_). In both I Guess This is Goodbye and Giants in the Sky, Jack's storyline sees him trade his cow, Milky-White for the magic beans which later become the iconic beanstalk that he climbs twice to steal from the giants. The bean motif is featured specifically at 0:07 to symbolise the 5 beans and at 0:16 becomes the main basis for the underscoring in I Guess This is Goodbye. At 2:58 in Giants in the Sky, this motif becomes the main melodic line sung by Jack. These 5 notes are clearly incorporated in the first number and more subtly in the second to show how the magic beans and Jack's wish, similar to the other characters, controls all his choices and actions including: selling his best friend, stealing from the giants twice and this eventuates in him killing one of the giants, dark moral choices he wouldn't have made before entering the woods.

As Act 1 ends and Act 2 begins, all is well in the fairytale universe. In Ever After ending the first act all the characters ignore the wrong they did along the way and sing at 1:12 noting how perfect their lives are now they have achieved their wish, morally right or not.

"To be happy, and forever you must see your wish come true, don't be careful, don't be clever when you see your wish, pursue" noting how perfect their lives are now they have achieved their wish, morally right or not. In Act 1 Sondheim and Lapine raise the question of whether

one’s wishes should guide one’s behaviour and if so, what ramifications are faced for their immoral means of achieving the wish? These same questions are answered throughout Act 2 as the characters face death and destruction unless they change their goals from being selfish and individual to communal and synergistic. So Happy begins Act 2 and brings to light the false front that everyone is now “so happy” that they have their dream life from their wish, when in reality all the characters sing “Wishes may bring problems, such that you regret them. Better that though than to never get them.” This is followed by the crash and return of the Bean theme as the Witch enters with the news that a giant is running rampant.

Your Fault/Last Midnight is the most poignant piece in the second act and clearly shows the destruction of character and morals created by the woods as the harsh reality of the character’s situation is realised and they have no choice but to blame each other instead of admitting their flaws. Throughout this number the Beans theme is snuck into the underscoring to remind the audience and characters that ___

Last Midnight “Had to get your wish, doesn’t matter how anyway it doesn’t matter now”

Cinderella and Baker refusing to give the Witch Jack to stop the giant killing them all leads into “You’re so nice, you’re not good you’re not bad you’re just nice. I’m not good i’m not nice i’m just right.” “Here you want a bean? Have another bean. Beans were made for making you rich” the characters scramble on all fours to grab the beans - insatiable need for them like their wishes in the first act. LINK TO HARSH REALITY

No One Is Alone completes character arc of Cinderella and shows her grow from a girl to a woman as she becomes responsible for Little Red. Sondheim stated in Into The Woods, A Conversation Piece with Sondheim and Lapine that “Cinderella is the character who changes the most from Act 1 to 2 and the song becomes a parent-child song.” _____

Sondheim later states that “This is where the bean theme becomes calm, herd in the accompaniment and is no long agitated or sinister.” This is shown through the transformation of the Bean theme in the music as it becomes inverted at 2:13 as The Baker and Cinderella finally accept what they have done and chose to admit that “People make mistakes... thinking they’re alone” (now realise theyre a community and need to be together) This shows the Bean theme finally coming to a resolution as the original and inverted theme find peace along with the characters. LINK TO HARSH REALTIY

The song talks about us needing each other regardless. It’s like the parents are telling the kids a fairytale.

“I wish...” “I know.” “wrong things right things, who can say what’s true?”

finale “Wishes come true, not free”