Semiotic Analysis: Classic Fairy-tales Versus Shrek

In this essay, I will be rhetorically analysing the DreamWorks animation Shrek (2001) to show how it challenges the classical telling of a fairy-tale. The film represented a major turning point in the representation of fairy-tales; in fact, it opposes to the classical story of the damsel in distress saved by a prince, that of an ugly ogre that yet proves worthy of love. In order to understand the impact Shrek had, I will first identify the classic fairy-tales elements, then demonstrate how the film subverts them.

Classic fairy-tales vs. Shrek: characters

As per Propp's works, fairy-tales (or magic tales) always have 7 fixed characters: the villain, the dispatcher, the (magical) helper, the princess or damsel in distress, the donor, the hero, the false hero. Also, the structure of fairy-tales is usually fixed: hero is assigned or looks for a quest, villain tries to stop him, hero defeats villain, hero saves and marries damsel in distress.

Now, if we analyse how these characters and plot elements are told in Shrek, we can easily identify how everything seems to be upside down, in a tale that is clearly told to adults more than children.

For my analysis, I considered three main characters: the hero, the princess and the helper.

Classic Hero

The signifier is usually a strong, loyal, handsome prince or knight, with beautiful eyes and hair. It stands for (signified) nobility (of class and morals), compassion, peace, and good emotions.

Shrek

The signifier is here a green, ugly, man-eating ogre, who lives outside of the civil world. It stands for (signified) ugliness, violence, lack of hygiene and selfishness.

As we see above, Shrek does not correspond to the usual hero: he is not handsome nor classy; he smells and talks in an inappropriate way. In addition, his motivation to start the quest and rescue the princess is not a noble feeling, but the need of having his home back. Shrek does not choose to become a hero: he does not care about marrying a princess, he just wants his life back to normal and his swamp all for himself; the only way to obtain this is by working for the villain, Lord Farquaad, in exchange for his land.

However, in several situations Shrek will prove his loyalty and good heart, thus subverting the usual association between signifier and signified: for once – and this will be clearer with the following films – the man-eating ogre is the hero, while those who should be heroes are actually selfish and empty.

Classic Princess

The signifier is usually a beautiful and sophisticated damsel in distress, usually a princess who has somehow been wronged. It stands for (signified) elegance, delicacy and romanticism as the princess waits for her prince to come and save her.

Princess Fiona

The signifier is a female ogre – even if we will find out later during the film – who has nothing sophisticated nor classy. It stands for (signified) the opposite of the virtues above: there is no delicacy no elegance in Fiona, yet she is somehow romantic.

As for Shrek, Fiona also subverts the usual association signifier/signified: instead of waiting patiently for a man to come and saver her, she learned martial arts so that she could be able to defend herself. In addition, she is outspoken, brave and fierce; and even if she believes in true love, she can be practical and down-to-earth.

The helper

The signifier is usually a creature with magical powers, who gives suggestions and support to the hero. In case of animals, they are usually majestic and elegant, as to reflect the nobility of the hero. The elements it represents (signified) are usually loyalty, docility and total commitment to the hero's quest.

Donkey

The signifier is a donkey, not the brightest of animals on earth, whose only power is the ability to talk.

Donkey is not the usual helper, nor the beautiful white stallion that heroes love to ride. He is witty and talkative, sometimes even irritating, since he does speak his mind out without asking for permission. Yet, he is a perfect example of friendship: he does not depend on Shrek, he chooses to be by the ogre's side and supports him in his choices, but remains true to his ideas when this are in contrast with Shrek's.

The way characters interact is also quite relevant: there is a high use of irony and no presence of an omniscient narrator, that puts dialogues in a central position. In addition, characters break the fourth wall and address the audience directly: it happens at the end, when Shrek discovers the camera and turns it away before kissing Fiona. It can be considered as ironic interfacing because it shows the unconventional interaction between the author and Shrek; at the same time, this is an example of metadrama that shows us how the ogre is aware of the classic mechanisms for fairy-tales storytelling. The same can be also found at the end of the opening scene: after shouting at worried and angry peasants, Shrek suggests them "This is the part where you run away".

Classic fairy-tales vs. Shrek: structure and environment

In classic fairy-tales – and by classic, it is now clear we mean Disney stories, constantly mocked by Shrek – we are used to a specific structure. The story usually starts with an omniscient narrator and the classic Once upon a time formula, followed by pictures that support what is

being told. From this point of view, Shrek respects the tradition: the first scene shows an opening book, and as the pages go on a voice starts telling a story:

“Once upon a time, there was a lovely princess, but she had an enchantment upon her of a fearful sort, which could only be broken by love’s first kiss. She was locked away in a castle, guarded by a terrible fire breathing dragon; many brave knights had attempted to free her from this dreadful prison, but none prevailed. She waited in the dragon’s keep, in the highest room of the tallest tower, waiting for her true love and true love’s first kiss.”

All of a sudden, a giant green hand appears and rips off a page, which – we understand – is going to be used as toilet paper. This is already a clear statement of: 1. how the story is going to be told; 2. what is the author’s opinion on the classic Disney stories.

In terms of surroundings there is also a major change, well described below:

Standard Disney environment

- sunny field
- birds chirping
- friendly animals accompanying hero/princess

Shrek environment

- dark swamp
- no animals around (not welcomed)
- beware sign

The colours of the two pictures symbolize the different tone: where Disney tends to use light colours to give the idea of opening, in Shrek there are darker colours to give a feeling of closure. Of course, much depends on the location of the swamp – that is, in the middle of a forest – but they also somehow show the isolation of the ogre. An isolation he chose, and he somehow likes, as demonstrated by the BEWARE, OGRE sign that he put at the entrance to keep everybody away. Still, there is a sort of calm in the swamp and some rays of light pass through the leaves, as to say that it is possible to be happy even living in an ugly, dirty swamp. We do not seem to find the animals we are used to see in the forest: birds chirping and dressing princesses, deers dancing around, rabbits jumping happily around.

The representation of Duloc is also a symbol, a clear reference to Disneyland, with a giant mascot of Lord Farquaad welcoming guests at the entrance – which has turnstile gates, as in amusement parks. While the villain’s castle is usually represented as a dark manor on the top of a spooky hill, the villain is here hidden behind a glamorous coat, in a clean and smooth palace – very high to compensate something, as Shrek will say -, surrounded by perfectly cut gardens and a merry-go-round music.

Mocking the classical Disney Princess: the princess contest

One of the most representative moments of this film, where the ideals behind Disney stories are revealed and mocked, is when Lord Farquaad asks the Magic Mirror how to become king. The

Mirror, then, offers him an easy solution: marrying a princess. Follows a The Dating Game moment (original music included), where three princesses – bachelorettes – are presented through their hobbies and virtues so that he can pick one. This moment is a stopgag for a not-so-subtle critique of the idea behind Disney's fairy-tales: women are supposed to be full of virtues to enchant men, and to wait until they are chosen by a prince from a catalogue, not differently from a car or a tv.

It is astonishing to think that his choice will fall on Fiona, the only one who, instead of waiting to be saved, learned karate to protect herself.

Conclusion

As a general conclusion, we can say that Shrek challenged the status quo, and there resided its power. In a world dominated by appearance and stereotypes, Shrek teaches us that fairy-tales can have different rules and that we can all write our own. In the end, Fiona does not wait to be saved from her curse, but frees herself through love and acceptance; Shrek proves that one can be a hero and an ogre, since one does not exclude the other; Donkey demonstrates that love can hide in unconventional places and still be amazing (the proof is his love story with the dragon).

Basically, Shrek is just a different declination of a fairy-tale: the fairy-tale langue (structure) is intact but declined in a different way (parole).

Sources

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