Versions Of Beauty And The Beast

Beauty and the Beast is a story that people of all ages and backgrounds know and love today. It may be a “tale as old as time,” but it has changed in many ways since its original conception by Villeneuve in 1740. Different aspects of the plot and its characters have been emphasized or downplayed in order to put a new spin on the story as it aged. These changes indeed were affected by the media through which the story was told, from oral storytelling, to print, to film. However, the biggest influencer on the shape the story takes comes from the time period of which it was conceived and the values of society at that time. The versions of Beauty and the Beast reflect the time periods they were produced in, from Beaumont’s short story, to Disney’s 1991 animation, to the 2017 live action remake.

In Beaumont’s version, Beauty eats dinner with the Beast without putting up resistance. This is reflective of the child marriages happening at the time the story was written. Beaumont’s target audience consisted of only young girls, many of whom were being forced into these marriages. These girls would not have the option to avoid eating with their husbands, as this would be one of the duties to be considered a “good” housewife. In addition, Beaumont’s decision to make Beauty neither royalty or a peasant was a step forward in the literary world of that time. Beaumont was referring to the changes happening between classes throughout the mid 18th century (Elkins).

In Disney’s 1991 animated version, Belle refuses to have dinner with the Beast. This is in sharp contrast to Beaumont’s version, as Disney is moving away from Beauty being an obedient woman for the Beast. Disney also starts to incorporate small details to show that even though Belle is beautiful, she is not perfect. The animators intentionally added the wisp of hair that falls over her forehead, saying that it “was important that not every hair be in place” (Sampson). The writers at Disney were trying to move towards more feminist ideas but struggled; thus they hired a lady name Linda Woolverton to aid in the endeavor. Woolverton convinced the male animators to cut a scene of Belle baking a cake for her father, as it was “not in her character. She wouldn't even know how to bake” (Sampson). Another time Woolverton incorporated more feminist attitudes into the script was when she countered the male animators’ idea to have Belle crying most of the time she was in the castle. Woolverton said, “She cried all the time. I said, 'Guys, I don't think she would cry this much. I mean, I wouldn't cry this much.” Changes like this helped to further develop Belle’s character into a more independent woman, aiming to refute the longstanding ideas that women are too emotional or that they need a man to help guide them in their lives. However, the writers still had a long way to go in order to fully embrace her independence and intelligence. For example, the writers may have turned Belle into a brainy bookworm, but they used it as a reason for her to be an outcast to her town. They also made her intellect inessential for the rest of the story because in the end, she helped the Beast through nurture and kindness.

By giving the objects in the castle personalities, Disney is able to appeal towards their target audience of children. The objects were able to push the story along, while helping both Belle and the Beast. Also, the addition of Gaston and Lefou helped to add comic relief, again appealing towards their target audience. Furthermore, Disney delivers a lesson that’s applicable for young boys by including Gaston in the 1991 film. Even though Gaston was

handsome and manly, Belle did not choose him. Disney creates Gaston to show young boys how not to treat women. This lesson is emphasized further as the Beast begins to show emotion and gentleness towards Belle, and in the end, he wins her. Disney also made a step forward in film by creating a handsome villain, a concept that the studio had never tried before (Sampson).

The 2017 live action version reflected the progressive values of modern society through the inclusion of different races and sexualities. The movie had Disney's first live action interracial kisses, which take place between the couple Cadenza and Madame de Garderobe and the couple Plumete and Lumiere (BBC). The film also included Disney's first openly gay character LeFou, who doesn't hide the fact that he has a crush on Gaston. Disney used LeFou's sexuality to add to the story and develop the character further. Instances like these reflect the changing values of our society, like embracing diversity and inclusion.

Emma Watson also put her own spin on Belle in the 2017 version in order to further develop the character as an independent, tomboyish, adventuresome girl. These changes can be seen in Belle's appearance, specifically her style. Instead of an apron like in the 1991 version, Belle is wearing tattered pieces of clothing and boots, giving the impression that she is active and explorative. In this version, Belle is also more than just a bookworm; she is a hands-on inventor who knows her way around her father's shop. She is very aware of the fact that people in the town think she is odd, and her father addresses this by saying that she is "ahead of the time." Despite what the townspeople think of her, Belle is still seen teaching a young girl to read, which further develops Belle as an activist, so to speak.

The changes in characters and plot details between the three variations of Beauty and the Beast are prominent, echoing the standards and values of the time periods in which they were conceived. Aspects such as change in target audience and society's movement towards more feministic principles transformed the story into how we know it today. The ever-changing fairy tale of Beauty and the Beast is a prime example to see how we have progressed as a society, providing a useful tool to learn about the past and anticipate the future.