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The Feminist Significance of "Beauty and the Beast" on Modern Society

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The Feminist Significance of “Beauty and the Beast” on Modern Society

Fairy tales embody the cliché Prince-Rescues-The-Damsel archetype, inspiring eras of Disney and Princess worshippers and ideals. The classic “Beauty and the Beast” fairy tale enforces another clichéd concept of female identity changing the “bad boy”; if a woman’s heart is pure and obedient she can convert the savage man. Angela Carter’s “The Tiger’s Bride” is a “reutilization” of “Beauty and the Beast” to reach contemporary audiences through a heroine contradicting these gender stereotypes (Thury 852). “The Tiger’s Bride” is therefore best understood for modern interpretation under a feminist perspective.

Strong female heroines are important for future generations to combat patriarchal standards and history and contrast conformist gender conventions. “The Tiger’s Bride” was published within a collection of short stories in 1979. Carter’s reutilization of a classic fairy tale dating back to 18th century France represents current shifting gender roles in society and modern society’s changing values. “The Tiger’s Bride” begins with Beauty’s father losing her to the Beast whilst gambling at a game of cards. This is a modern take on the tradition of daughters being given away without their consent (Thury 852). It represents the history of women being treated as property, a belief still present today in many cultures. Carter’s retelling also consists of requests from the Beast to witness Beauty naked, “the sight of a young lady’s skin that no man has seen before,” (Carter 860). This emphasizes the importance of virginity in young women in arranged marriages. In society if a woman is not “pure” she is worth nothing, reinforcing the

view of “property” depreciation. Beauty realizes, “For now my own skin was my sole capital in the world” (Carter 857). In Carter’s tale, Beauty refuses the Beast of this privilege. Although he is not violent toward her and instead shows her his true animal form, beginning the path to Beauty’s transformation.

The animal bridegroom motif is one that appears throughout history in numerous myths across cultures, a motif that can provide insight into women’s roles during the time or in a specific society. In the traditional beauty tale, the Beast transforms into a handsome prince at the end due to Beauty’s actions and proposes marriage. This exemplifies a girl’s purity; to be pure they must follow the rules of societal standards within the context of arranged marriage. The reward for this virtuousness is symbolic of the Beast turning into a handsome prince (Thury 852). The Beast motif warns girls to make the best of arranged marriage, and to accept the husband chosen for them per social situation of the times. “The Animal Bridegroom tale encodes social fears through metaphor” (Bisbee 26), portraying cultures in which male dominance exists in marriage customs. The motif is a symbolic representation of young women’s anxieties and fears, one of the reasons the tale remains so popular throughout history. The motif is also representative of equating women’s status in society with that of beasts; Beauty and the Beast both have in common their insignificant roles under men (Bisbee 93). Carter states “All the best religions in the world state categorially that not beasts nor women were equipped with [souls]” (862). Carter’s version is about a relationship between equals.

Beauty renounces humanity and turns into a beast at the end of Carter’s tale. Upon seeing Beast in his true form, she too wishes to embrace her freest state that cannot be expressed within society. This is a reversal of the Beast turning to a human; instead, Beauty chooses to turn into an animal and join the Beast of her own will. This transformation represents individuality and the

right to make one's own decisions, a right often denied to women (Thury 852). This also depicts rejection of conventional gender roles. This is important as "gender is a tool used by a patriarchy to limit opportunities for women" (Bisbee 93). Questioning gender identity for both men and women through individual expression is important to contemporary society as shown by Carter.

Numerous "Beauty and the Beast" retellings are evident in pop culture today through movies, TV shows, books, plays, etc. The tale remains popular throughout history from its ability to represent gender and varying ideologies in society; the Beast symbolism serves to portray humanity's most animalistic nature hidden beneath conformist culture. The new live action "Beauty and the Beast" movie set to release in March 2017 from Disney is a highly-anticipated film. Featuring Emma Watson as Belle, Watson is a known UN ambassador for women and equal rights advocate. The new live action film will give Belle a career as an inventor, influenced by Watson's feminist work (Furness). The movie itself may prove not as close to feminist ideals as hoped, as this contemporary twist is only one factor. Another famous TV show and book series, *Game of Thrones*, includes themes found in "Beauty and the Beast." *Game of Thrones* includes many strong female characters and leaders within a context of male hierarchy and dominance in leadership and relationships. The women in the show are used for arranged marriages in political games. Cersei Lannister is forced to give up her daughter for an arranged marriage due to political alliances, recalling her own experience of arranged marriage and the accompanying dread. Sansa Stark is a major character regarding forced marriage. Her forced marriage to Tyrion Lannister draws some "Beauty and the Beast" parallels, as Tyrion was regarded as a type of "beast" for being a dwarf. Sansa's marriage to Tyrion was a punishment to her, illustrating her standing was on the same level as a "beast." This portrays how marriage also determined societal ranking. These circumstances depict the manner these marriages were used

to benefit and serve a patriarchal political system in the show, as well as commenting on similar historical practices. A young woman's sole goal in life was to marry a rich man, a custom still alluded to today.

"The Tiger's Bride" by Angela Carter is an example of reutilizing historical fairy tales to connect with modern audiences and their values. Analyzing both "Beauty and the Beast" as well as "The Tiger's Bride," allows comparison between past beliefs and current beliefs within the framework of the Beast and Beauty trope. Contemporary values have progressed to empower women and break gender stereotypes, which can be seen in pop culture as well. The power of myth reveals our historical and cultural progression as a society and as humans.

Works Cited

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