

УДК. 821.111

## WALT DISNEY'S INTERPRETATION OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE – RECONSIDERING AMERICAN MYTHS

L. Brachová

Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica

Walt Disney is the most influencing personae in the entertainment industry. However, his influence reaches far beyond it. His position is outstanding not only in the field of film and cartoon but also in literature and music. Even though his interpretation of children's literature was labeled as manipulation by some critics, he is remembered by everyone. Simple images and words like simplicity, imagination, inspiration, true love, beauty, belief in a better world, positive attitude, belief in our own dreams trigger powerful emotional experience and carry moral and psychological messages.

Disney's interpretation of children's classic literature is on one hand simplified, but on the other hand enriched by synthesis of art. Therefore, he should not be negatively blamed for an Americanization and modification of European tales since he gave them a new spirit. He used something that was already known by people and replaced the negative plots and images with positive ones. He showed what the main purpose of an artist is – to help people to start to believe in themselves and in their dreams again. Oversimplification of the classic myths allows us to implement them into our lives, into particular situations. They serve us as an example, a simple guide and as a theoretical lesson. They do not create a caricature of truth. It depends on our attitude. Being aware of both the pleasant and unpleasant is the key since life is a complex matter, according to Disney: *“Life is composed of lights and shadows, and we would be untruthful, insincere, and saccharine if we tried to pretend there were no shadow”*. [5] *“I always like to look on the optimistic side of life, but I am realistic enough to know that life is a complex matter.”* [5]

It is important to note that Disney's literary interpretations were not *“designed to reflect the literary elements of theme, characterization, and writing style found in the original books”* and *“one of Disney's greatest achievements in the realm of film was to replace reader's desire to pursue a book's theme”*. (1) Disney's popularity do not dwell in his literary knowledge but in his attitude – he found a good story within the classic tale, made its plot simple and rosy to suit the needs of his audience. He created *“a new kind of entertainment medium”* reflecting values of middle Americans. He reinforced the emotional power of the story with music and fast actions [1].

To put the theory into practice, we mention one of Disney's first famous interpretations – *“Snow White”* – since it serves us as the best example to show his unique artistry. To compare his interpretation with the original of the Grimms, we can say that Disney brought a new life, imagination and beauty to their story. For instance, the Grimms did not write how many dwarfs there were and did not tell the difference between them. The interpretation of the Grimms lacked optimism, humor and a happy end based on collective work. Disney realized that a longer film for children deserved a lot of humorous situations. The original dwarfs became caricatured dramatic characters with individual characteristic traits and names emphasizing their character [1].

Music and songs were essential part of the story. They helped to characterize every character in the film. Romantic composer Richard Wagner called this technique *“leitmotiv”* (a series of characteristic music motifs for every character) [4]. Disney created a genre similar to a musical theatre. The setting took place in a magical forest with a lot of various animals present. For all this features mentioned, he did not need lengthy dialogues since everything important was expressed through the pictures, music and setting. It all had its purpose since children can become easily lost in lengthy dialogues and can easily lose continuity. (In real life, what matters the most are not the words but actions creating emotional experience.) He sought a deeper meaning within the original story and wanted to make it more realistic. Disney's *“Snow White”* lost all the irrational elements, everything was made logical - love, jealousy. Love had to be visible – from Snow White's encounter with Prince, her beauty blossomed even more. Pictures depicted beauty and music depicted love. Richard Wagner called this synthesis *“Gesamtkunstwerk”* – synthesis of art (music, picture, dance, philosophy,

literature) [4]. Mary Poppins is another demonstration of the synthesis of art. The comedy has a valuable theme, great music, dance and tricks. Disney transformed the story from P.L. Travers' book into a musical. Songs with their simple but catchy melodies became known even before the official release of the movie. For instance, a famous song "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" became an Oscar hit [3]

Connection of Disney's work with music is very remarkable. However, very little attention is paid to Disney's relation to music. While working on his films, he cooperated with classical music and composers like Igor Stravinsky. For instance, in his "Fantasia" he used "Tocatta and Fugue in D minor" from Bach, "Pastoral Symphony" from Beethoven, "Ave Maria" from Schubert, "The Nutcracker Suite" from Tchaikovsky and "Night on Bald Mountain" from Mussorgsky. The conductor of the "Fantasia", Leopold Stokowski, found similarities between Disney and Diaghilev, Russian ballet innovator. "Both were ambitious, with a roving curiosity; both brought about new forms of art through the merging of all of them — music, dance, painting, theater. Stravinsky was the improbable link between them." [6]

To conclude this research, Disney showed us that there is no boundary between film, cartoon, music, theatre and literature. They all are various forms of art with the same function which is besides entertaining to communicate moral and psychological messages. Disney's fairy tales can serve us as a key to understand the world and ourselves (who we truly are and how we can contribute to this world to make it a better place). His work has power to shape our minds and souls through endless images, messages, music and its beauty. Through his movies and tales we can experience extraordinary beauty and emotional wealth.

#### References

1. MAY, Jill P. "Walt Disney's Interpretation of Children's Literature", published by the [National Council of Teachers of English](#). The Language Arts (April 1981): pp. 463-472.
2. CHERNUS, Ira. "The meaning of "myth" in the American context", published by the Mythic America: Essays (September 11, 2013).[03-29-2017] <https://mythicamerica.wordpress.com/the-meaning-of-myth-in-the-american-context/>
3. JACHNIN, Boris. "Walt Disney". Prague: ČSFÚ, 1990. pp.13-269. ISBN 80-7004-037-8
4. NAVRÁTIL, Miloš. "Dějiny hudby. Přehled evropských dějin hudby". Ostrava: Montanex, a.s., 2011. pp.183,185. ISBN 978-80-7225-344-9
5. "107 Walt Disney Quotes That Perfectly Capture His Spirit", published by the KeepInspiringme.[03-29-2017] <http://www.keepinspiring.me/walt-disney-quotes/>
6. KAUFMAN, Sarah. "How Walt Disney got 'Rite of Spring' right", published by the Washington Post (June 21, 2013).[05-15-2017] [https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater\\_dance/how-walt-disney-got-rite-of-spring-right/2013/06/19/8d008e78-d895-11e2-a9f2-42ee3912ae0e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.739736987580](https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/theater_dance/how-walt-disney-got-rite-of-spring-right/2013/06/19/8d008e78-d895-11e2-a9f2-42ee3912ae0e_story.html?utm_term=.739736987580)