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Onions Have Layers: A Satirical Deconstruction of *Shrek*

To be “Shreked” was not a compliment. In fact, at DreamWorks Animation, it meant professional exile, banishment after failing on a more important project. The term captured the studio’s lack of faith in *Shrek*, a film that was widely regarded during production as an “ugly stepchild” of the animation wing and a “low-budget boondoggle” (“When DreamWorks Punished Animators by Making Them Work on ‘Shrek’”). Speaking broadly, animated fairytales such as *Shrek* have functioned as instruction manuals, teaching children and adults alike what to value, whom to admire, and what kind of happiness is worth pursuing. For decades, this role was filled by Disney, whose rigid narratives pushed ideals of beauty, romance, and moral simplicity underneath the guise of “timeless tradition”. By the late 1990s, these conventions were so familiar that they were invisible; it was as if these ideals were natural instead of constructed. It is from this cultural saturation that the satire *Shrek* emerged. The film compels audiences to laugh at the genre’s assumptions, exclusions, and corporate gatekeepers. The satire’s crude storytelling and irreverent tone are not accidental, but rather rhetorical strategies aimed at dismantling the authority of the fairytale itself. *Shrek* was a self-conscious critique, an assault on fairytale ideology, on Disney’s cultural hegemony, on the corporate forces that impose on us narrow notions of what is beautiful, worthwhile and story-worthy. Emerging from DreamWorks’ own “gulag,” *Shrek* utilizes satirical techniques throughout the film’s sequence to critique various

facets of ‘the fairytale,’ deconstructing established tropes ranging from the conventional protagonist, exclusion, hierarchical assumptions of worth and a happily-ever-after.

From its opening moments, *Shrek* dismantles the conventional fairytale protagonist through reversal, reduction and *reductio ad absurdum*. The film begins exactly as a traditional fairytale would, with a storybook promising destiny, romance, and “true love’s first kiss.” *RIP. THUD.* Shrek rips a page out of the book and uses it as toilet paper. “True love’s first kiss. Like that’s ever gonna happen,” Shrek laughs (*Shrek* 00:00:50-00:02:30). This opening scene utilizes invective, the underlying jaded tone almost making it seem like the studio was using Disney itself as the toilet paper. Immediately it’s clear; this is not our conventional protagonist. Rather than introducing the traditional hero—noble, attractive and aspirational—the film immediately imposes this grotesque image of an ogre’s morning routine onto the audience. Visually, Shrek is introduced through exaggerated bodily humor and reduction: bathing in mud, brushing his teeth with slime, and casually belching. He refers to himself plainly as an “ogre,” fully aware of what that label implies (*Shrek* 00:09:27). Ogres have layers, yet what the film shows us thus far is only the brutish side of them. Shrek is also socially isolated, crude and blunt, unapologetically uninterested in social approval. As an ogre, he is also at the bottom of the societal totem pole. The film exaggerates this marginalization, portraying him as isolated, filthy, and fully aware of how society perceives him. This is immediately established by the villagers’ reaction to the ogre. When they charge at him with torches and pitchforks, shouting “Get him!” and “Run!”, the audience sees that Shrek is treated as a monster regardless of his behavior, which has been relatively tame up until this point (*Shrek* 00:03:41). One would expect the ogre to be on the bad side here, that the villagers are righteous in their pursuit. That’s what the traditional fairytale would condition you to believe. However, in this film, the roles are reversed, and by seeing the

world through the eyes of our protagonist, an ogre, the viewer is made aware of the injustices that supposed monsters are subjected to. When faced with these intruders, Shrek doesn't harm them, rather choosing to feed into their expectations and snarking: "This is the part where you run away," (*Shrek* 00:04:15). By exaggerating the absurdity of this encounter, how Shrek does nothing at all and is still targeted and how the villagers have an irrational fear of the ogre, *Shrek* employs *reductio ad absurdum* to reveal the irrationality of judging worth based on appearance alone. Through these moments, the film exposes how fairytales equate heroism with appearance. Shrek's ugliness, rather than any moral failing, is what marks him as a threat, revealing how shallow the genre's standards truly are. He is simply inconvenient and unattractive by conventional standards. Shrek as the main character in this film tears down expected notions of what a protagonist should or should not be. Brute instead of elegant, ugly instead of handsome, the beginning section of this film chips away at the conventional protagonist.

This critique expands through the film's treatment of banishment, which operates as both narrative event and institutional allegory. Within the story, Lord Farquaad's exile of fairytale creatures is framed as a bureaucratic necessity, carried out through reduction and caricature. Characters are labeled nuisances, rounded up, caged, and sold, stripped of individuality and symbolic authority. Beloved characters are treated as jokes, as unnecessary pieces of burden that are sold to the highest bidder, drawing comparisons to how Disney treats their characters as money making machines (*Shrek* 00:05:25-00:06:05). Characters are shells of their former selves, with Pinocchio being auctioned like property, and the Three Little Pigs treated as livestock (*Shrek* 00:05:37, 00:14:35). Snow White is made fun of for living with seven other men. "[K]iss her dead frozen lips and find out what a live wire she is," says the magic mirror, utilizing

reductio ad absurdum to show how absurd this fairytale story actually is (Shrek 00:18:55). The charming prince isn't actually in love with her, she's asleep! It frames this classic Disney story as perverted. Cinderella is poked fun at as well for "cooking and cleaning for her two evil sisters". The act of dumping them into Shrek's swamp exemplifies incongruity, as a space associated with filth and disorder becomes the repository for characters once central to fairytale tradition. This destruction of familiar symbols is deliberate, exposing how institutions claim to preserve tradition while actively discarding it.

Crucially, this banishment mirrors the film's own production history within DreamWorks. *Shrek* was treated as a professional exile, assigned to animators who had fallen out of favor and regarded internally as a disposable, low-priority project. Much like the fairytale creatures, the film itself was viewed as inconvenient, artistically unrefined, and unworthy of serious investment. The swamp becomes a metatextual stand-in for this creative dumping ground. It represents a space where unwanted ideas, aesthetics, and people are sent when they fail to meet institutional standards. Yet both the film and its protagonist transform this exclusion into strength. Shrek himself almost feels like the studio's champion. While the protagonist's isolation grants him autonomy, the animators' marginalization allows for creative freedom unconstrained by corporate expectation; the very conditions meant to suppress *Shrek* instead enabled its critical voice. The fact that the film ultimately achieved massive commercial success, making over \$42 million during opening week alone, only heightens the satire, revealing how institutional judgment often fails to recognize value until it becomes profitable ("Shrek (2001) - Box Office and Financial Information"). It tells a story of underdogs in two ways: through Shrek as well as the studio itself.

As Shrek enters Duloc, the film targets hierarchical assumptions of worth through irony, parody and incongruity. If Shrek represents those excluded by fairytale society, Lord Farquaad embodies the systems that enforce such exclusion. The aspiring king's authority is exaggerated to absurdity: he rules absolutely, yet is physically small, creating a visual irony that undermines his legitimacy. His obsession with perfection contrasts sharply with his insecurity, exposing the emptiness of power rooted in appearance. This choice is not incidental. Farquaad is widely understood as a satirical caricature of a real-world studio executive, specifically DreamWorks co-founder Jeffrey Katzenberg's former boss at Disney. The character's obsessive control, fixation on perfection, and carefully staged public image mirror corporate leadership culture. Duloc itself functions as a parody of order. Its mechanical cheerfulness and theme-park aesthetic create situational irony, as the most "perfect" kingdom is in fact the most oppressive. Its singing dolls, rigid order, and artificial harmony parody Disney's corporate branding. Shrek's treatment within this space reinforces the hierarchy; he is addressed with contempt, stripped of individuality, and reduced to his label as an "ogre." In the film, Princess Fiona, the bachelorette that Lord Farquaad sent Shrek to save, demonstrates how much appearance governs people's perception of worth. When saved by Shrek, she initially is grateful, praising him, telling the ogre that she is forever indebted. She goes as far as to call Shrek's talking donkey a "noble steed," (*Shrek* 00:40:50). One may view this and believe that the princess is resisting the established rules of how a charming knight must look. But then the helmet comes off. When Shrek reveals himself to be an ogre, Princess Fiona's whole demeanor changes. All of a sudden, Shrek's noble steed becomes a "pet" (*Shrek* 00:43:00). All of a sudden, Shrek is ineligible to be her true love's kiss. Her reaction reveals how deeply appearance governs her expectations of worth and

romance. This shift exposes the incongruity between Fiona's moral language and her underlying assumptions. Even someone so optimistic, so seemingly pleasant can still harbor deep prejudice. More than just serving as an argument of how fairytales use appearance as a justification of worth, Princess Fiona continues to also play a role in challenging various other fairytale tropes.

Fiona herself embodies one of the film's most complex satirical characters. The princess is initially positioned as a damsel in distress, though she repeatedly defies that role. She beats up a gang of archers, handling them like a star from an action film while Shrek gets an arrow lodged up one of his buttocks (*Shrek* 00:53:00–00:53:30). She is proficient at handling herself in survival situations, setting up a campfire and later fearlessly turning a snake into a balloon. This reversal of gender norms exposes the artificiality of fairytale roles. However, Fiona's curse reveals the persistence of hierarchical valuation. Her shame surrounding her ogre form demonstrates internalized hatred; she views herself as unworthy not because of her actions, but because of her appearance. Fiona is capable, intelligent, and brave, yet believes she cannot be loved unless she conforms physically, because “[that] is not how a princess is supposed to look,” (*Shrek* 01:03:25–01:03:30). Whether it's Cinderella or Ariel being not just the nicest of the 3 sisters but also obviously the prettiest, or whether it's Sleeping Beauty being kissed by a prince in her sleep simply because she looked good, fairytales continuously push this image of what a virtuous and valuable woman is supposed to look like. Through Fiona, *Shrek* critiques how fairytales measure women's worth visually, reinforcing restrictive standards beneath narratives of romance and rescue.

The final act of the film is perhaps its most poignant, completely subverting expectations of a traditional happily-ever-after through the masterful use of anti-climax. Princess Fiona has realized her mistake; Shrek was her true love after all. After rejecting Lord Farquaad right before her vows, she turns to Shrek instead, now in her ogre form, and together they share a true love's kiss. There's golden dust, beautiful music, Fiona levitates into the air. Has it been done? Has she broken the curse? Has true love's first kiss worked? Yes, it has, Fiona floats back down to the ground, revealing herself to be... an ogre (*Shrek* 01:20:35). This anticlimactic resolution breaks the genre's central promise, subverting audience expectations of happiness relying on beauty. The irony is systematic: the moment meant to erase difference instead confirms it. By redefining Fiona's "true love's form" as ogrehood, the film argues that love does not perfect individuals but affirms them. As Shrek and Fiona ride off into the sunset, "[a]nd they lived ugly ever after" appears on the last page of a closing book. Phrased as if it's the opposite of "happily ever after", the phrase beautifully demonstrates the core message of this film: that one's appearance doesn't define them, and that beauty isn't a prerequisite to joy.

In conclusion *Shrek* employs satirical techniques throughout its chronological progression, to dismantle the fairytale framework piece by piece. Whether it's the traditional protagonist, exclusion, hierarchical assumptions of worth or a happily-ever-after, *Shrek* satirizes Disney to demonstrate that one's appearance doesn't define them. While parting Duloc to save Fiona, Shrek says: "Ogres are like onions," (*Shrek* 00:27:05). Onions have layers, Shrek explains, and so do ogres; they cannot be understood at a glance, nor should they be judged by their outermost surface. Not everyone likes onions. Some find them unpleasant and unappealing, yet that distaste does not negate their depth or value. Fairytales train audiences to equate beauty

with goodness and difference with deficiency, whereas *Shrek* argues that difference and ugliness are not moral failings, but natural variations. The film ultimately reframes self-worth as something internal rather than bestowed by appearance, status, or approval. Extending its reach beyond just its characters, the film challenges viewers to reconsider how quickly they judge others, and how often they judge themselves. Onions have layers, and people do too, so don't be so quick to judge a book by its cover.

Works Cited

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