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An Overwhelming Satire in *The Princess Bride*

Not all heroes are princes and knights in shining armor: some are pirates, farm boys, giants, and vengeful mercenaries. *The Princess Bride* tells such a tale, following the story of the beautiful peasant Buttercup as she is separated and reunited with her farmboy lover turned-pirate, Westley. During the 20th century, mass media allowed for many fairy-tales and fictional stories to be shared across cultures and over borders, where certain genres such as the classical fairy-tale became prominent and began to dictate and influence what was created in their stead. Written by William Goldman and adapted into a film under director Rob Reiner, the 1987 film *The Princess Bride* combines aspects of comedy, satire, and action to rewrite the existing structures dictating classical fairy-tales and set itself apart from its predecessors. While classical fairy tales detail shallow romances, predictable conflicts, and a romanticized perspective of monarchy, *The Princess Bride* through the use of role reversal, manipulation of the fourth wall, and a redefined perspective of true love, satirizes these widely accepted yet unrealistic conventions of a classical fairytale.

The battle between Westley and Inigo Montoya atop the Cliffs of Insanity in the film *The Princess Bride* exaggerates traditional character roles and sets the stage for the satire of the fairy-tale genre as a whole. At the point in the story where Inigo and the man in black, Westley, square off atop the Cliffs of Insanity, the audience is not aware of the motives and identity of both Inigo and the man in black. However, the behavior of the two men as they meet quickly

supersedes and contrasts the existing negative impressions left by these antagonists. As Vizzini leaves, Inigo waits patiently for the man in black to summit the cliff. He has the opportunity to attack and kill the man as he climbs, but that would apparently betray his honor and convictions. Rather, he sends down a rope to help the man along (*The Princess Bride* 00:19:00–00:22:00). The man in black is distrusting of Inigo, so Inigo makes a promise: “I swear on the soul of my father, Domingo Montoya, you will reach the top alive” (Goldman 96). The black man does not summit the cliff only to meet Inigo’s blade, rather, he is provided space as Inigo prepares himself for their duel. “We’ll wait until you’re ready” (Goldman 102) Inigo relates here, once more offering courtesy and refuge to his enemy. The man in black is patient leading up to the fight, and when they are both ready to kill the other, they fight each other with passion and mutual respect (*The Princess Bride* 00:22:00–00:26:00). The blatant disregard seen in the film for a traditional antagonist role evolves into a larger commentary and indirect criticism of character roles that are unassuming to the audience. The kindness of these bandits becomes hyperbolic, where not only does Inigo allow the man in black to summit and breathe, but at the end of the battle the man in black is merciful and merely knocks Inigo unconscious, before moving on to do the same to Fezzik, much like the merciful hero of a story. The satirical dimension of these characters’ actions in this critical scene is further exemplified through the character’s background and overall role in the plot of the story itself.

In developing a comedic, dramatic, and friendly battle between Inigo Montoya and the man in black, *The Princess Bride* employs a novel demonstration of heroism in the classical fairy tale plot to ultimately satirize and reverse the conventional character roles adopted in the prevailing genre. In this film, each character has complex aspects and emotional attributes. Before the duel, Ingio shares his story, detailing how “My father was slaughtered by a

six-fingered man... I dedicated my life to the study of fencing so that next time we meet I will not fail. I'll just go up to the six-fingered man and say 'Hello, my name is Inigo Montoya, you killed my father, prepare to die'" (Goldman 103-104). Inigo, who is revealed to be a key character, is guided by a vengeful mission rather than an evil conscience which leads him to kidnapping Buttercup. As it is revealed in the film that both Inigo and the man in black, Westley, serve as protagonists despite their background, their actions become hyperboles of justice and exhibit prominent role reversal in comparison to the fairy-tale genre. In a sharp contrast to the evil and ruthless killers depicted in classical fairy-tales, these men are principled and honorable with novel personalities that inspire the reader early-on with hope that they may not mean harm to the protagonist after all. Fairy-tale heroes are usually represented as knights in shining armor who come from glamorous backgrounds with mentors, resources, and immense talent to bolster their successes. These heroes are usually just, merciful and driven, which in this satire is extremified with Inigo's personal mission and Wessely's mercy. However many of these key character tropes are also reversed, resulting in heroes coming from antagonistic origins and enemies being made of the rich and powerful. This redefines the audience's perspective and experience with heroism, and demonstrates that the traditional approach to writing of heroism and justice in fairy-tales is not needed to develop an engaging and powerful film.

Through the final battle of the story's protagonists, *The Princess Bride* continues to reverse the roles of classical fairy-tale characters to satirize the conventions of the genre and reconstruct widely-accepted character roles. After saving Westley, the characters Inigo and Fezzik plot with Westley to stop the wedding between Prince Humperdink and Buttercup (*The Princess Bride* 01:15:00–01:17:00). In the context of a traditional fairy-tale, this would be the wicked plot—usually the princess and prince are destined to be together, all else be damned.

Rather, Buttercup loves a farmer boy turned-pirate and is to be saved by two bandits so she can flee the prince. The ensuing battle reflects the discordance between the actual story and the expected plot: Inigo, Westley, and Fezzik frighten their way into the castle and wage a ruthless battle onto the prince's men with little mercy, Inigo exclaiming “prepare to die” as he even confronts the six-fingered man, who was the prince's right-hand (*The Princess Bride* 01:18:00–01:24:00). The author begins to strongly deviate from a classical fairy tale beyond the simple implications of reversed roles. The characters are not just hyperbolic symbols of heroism and peace, but are just and violent in a righteous sense—unlike with Wessely's battle with Inigo, in this story there is no room for pacifism when rescuing a woman from a cruel and abusive man. The author makes it clear to the audience that true heroism can be found in a dark moment, and that any acts of peace or disengagement would fail to result in peace and justice—which is contrary to the romanticized ideologies presented in classical fairy tales where conflict is swift and easy between two opposing parties. The film not only puts classical character tropes into a bad light but explicitly uses role reversal to create a compelling film that completely contrasts many mainstream structures of the classical fairy-tale genre. The realistic violence seen in the battle against the prince more discreetly contributes to the satire as it uses the audience's emotional attachment and empathy for the captured Buttercup and vulnerable Westley to validate the characters use of force and fear, which itself contradicts the many ideologies of peace and honorable fighting used in the fairy-tale genre. Through this example of true heroism and battle, these final scenes in *The Princess Bride* become a satire and criticism of traditional fairy-tale roles and structure.

Through the escape of the story's protagonists, *The Princess Bride* through the use of an unorthodox ending demonstrates a novel way to finish what-was a classical tale to satirize the

fairy-tale genre itself. Usually, fairy-tales end with a successful romance and a position of power being granted to the protagonists. Often, the surrounding characters are supportive of their efforts and most conflict in the story has been dealt with; these stories end with quintessential happy-endings. The finale of *The Princess Bride* is no such quintessential happy-ending, although it is ‘happy’ in its own right. After a successful conquest, Buttercup and Westley escape from Florin alongside their companions on horseback, rather than taking the throne as one may expect in the story (*The Princess Bride* 01:30:00–01:32:15). For the audience, this is a breath of fresh air: the actions of the prince were so aligned with the villains that the audience is disengaged with a happy, royalty-filled, ending, and begins to reject the common conventions that make up a classical fairy tale story. The grandfather, who narrates the story to the audience, describes how “And on their ride of freedom, a wave of adoration swept over Buttercup, and she reached for Westley as he reached for her” (Goldman 222) with a kiss between the two being implied as the grandfather finishes his story. While the story ends in an unprecedented manner—the prince is dead, the castlemen are killed and wounded, and Westley is partially paralyzed—the ending of the story itself retains and reinforces the theme of love and success which the audience strives for. This creates a novel ending that supersedes the endings experienced in traditional fairy-tale stories, encouraging the audience to widen their perspective and move beyond the unspoken notion that a good ending must follow the objective and unrealistic format of a fairy tale. Combined with the ambient role reversal of the antagonists, where the Buttercup is no princess but a commoner and her savior is no prince but a pirate, the traditional character roles of the genre are indirectly criticized as the audience grasps that it does not take fame and fortune to create a strong character. These themes are further exemplified with the commentary of the grandfather and grandson, who address the film and the genre directly.

The telling of the story between the grandfather and his grandson, alongside its ensuing commentary, breaks the fourth wall to highlight the novel attributes of *The Princess Bride* and to satirize the classical fairy-tale plot and conventions as the story progresses. The movie itself begins with a young boy being read the story by his grandfather, who intermittently throughout the film asks a variety of questions. More than a comedic component, this young boy becomes a crucial aspect to the film— his commentary reflects that of the audience, and his grandfather's responses were such that they spoke directly to the audience, breaking the ‘fourth wall’ which separates the audience from the film itself. As the concerns and questions regarding the novel plot were addressed, the satire itself expanded to directly contrast and highlight the realities and expectations set forth with unrealistic classical fairy-tales. For example, the boy insists to his grandfather that the story was wrong, that Buttercup should not have been stuck with the prince and that Westley cannot be gone. The boy exclaims “After all that Westley did for her, if she didn’t marry him, it wouldn’t be fair” (Goldman 114). The boy’s opinion stems from the underlying false identity of “*The Princess Bride*” as a film which follows the plot of a classical fairy-tale, where the pace and progression of the story, especially in times of conflict, is predictable and reassuring to the often romantic-oriented audience. Through the integration of his opinion, a key aspect of a classical fairy tale in comparison to *The Princess Bride* is addressed and directly rebuked with the grandfather’s final statement that “Life isn’t fair, it’s just fairer than death, that’s all” (Goldman 114). With this statement, the ideal of an instant, predictable, and easy happily-ever-after ending portrayed with classical fairy-tales is brought to question and rejected as an unrealistic tale, reminding the audience both of the story’s harsh novelty and the comfortable, while unrealistic, structure being taken for granted in classical-fairy tales. This co-aligns with the novel’s ending and finale, which both rejected unrealistic notions

but also maintained a theme of success and true love. *The Princess Bride* uses this thirty-second scene to satirize and ultimately criticize fairy-tales as a whole through highlighting and criticizing a key component of the classical fairy tale.

The intrinsic theme of true love in a classical fairy tale is exaggerated and redefined throughout the film to demonstrate how true love is more than a shallow impression of the genre to consequently satirize the existing structure and role of true love and emotional attachment in the classical fairy-tale genre. In many fairy-tales, true love is an instant and permanent connection between the two protagonists that remains unwavering throughout the story and guides the protagonists towards their destiny. Unlike the sharp role-reversal of character tropes and direct criticism of key fairy-tale conventions, *The Princess Bride* in its portrayal of true love exhibits a more nuanced and discrete criticism of the fairy tale genre. In the story, true love and its power is not rejected but exemplified and revised. When the grandfather, who is telling the story itself to his grandson, insists that *The Princess Bride* is not a “kissing” book’ and is rather filled with “sports” and having “True love” (Goldman 4) he did not contradict himself, but highlighted a key satirical aspect in the movie: *The Princess Bride* does not exhibit shallow demonstrations of lust, but describes a tale of true love that is beyond the sensual aspect. In this movie, true love is a raging current which ebbs around tribulation but maintains a direct and palpable force. When Westley arrives to save Buttercup but is injured and vulnerable, Buttercup does not allow the lack of power and ability in the man at that moment to supersede her affection, for she loves him for what he was as a person and as her lover (*The Princess Bride* 01:25:00–01:30:37). This contrast between the shallow love displayed in the classical fairy-tale genre and the true love exhibited here satirizes the genre by highlighting the strengths of true love beyond its portrayal in classical fairy-tale fiction and by reducing true love to an

overwhelming powerful concept that is evoked in both the words, and actions of Buttercup and Westley. The audience remains familiar with the true-love concept, but is shown how true-love remains powerful without being reliant on typical character roles and tropes.

The Princess Bride completely satirizes the classical fairy-tale genre and its conventions of character roles, true love, and plot structure. The film reverses the roles of traditional fairy-tale tropes and conventions, utilizes the grandson and grandfather's commentary to directly assess the structure of the film, and redefines and exemplifies true love with the example of Westley and Buttercup. Characters who were perceived as adversaries such as the man in black, Westley, Inigo, and Fezzik become the heroes of the story, exhibiting sacrifice and determination to follow their principles in the ultimate portrayal of true heroism. As the grandson who is being read the story examines and questions its structure and plot, the grandfather addresses the audience's concerns directly and frames the film as a 'sports' movie with themes of war, true love, and miracles to convey its novelty and contrast to familiar, unrealistic, fairy-tale stories. The concept of true love is finally refined and exaggerated from the classical genre the film satirizes to describe how love is more than a sensual and swift attraction, but a lifelong connection that holds through tribulations and struggle. With these satirical themes of heroism and true love, the film *The Princess Bride* satirizes the existing classical fairy-tale genre to criticize its conventions and redefine what is needed to develop an engaging and moving story.

Works Cited

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