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And the Hands of the Clock Struck 8:16: *Metanarrative, Temporality and Happy Endings in Once Upon a Time*

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No phrase signals the beginning of a story like "once upon a time." According to Jessica Tiffin, "'Once upon a time' signals a transition to a different reality from our own," a reality in which magic reigns over logic, good always conquers evil, and hope defies doubt (13). In contemporary culture, the phrase "once upon a time" appears in diverse forms of narrative, from the romantic comedy film to the romance novel, all seeking to parody or draw upon the conventions of fairy tale. While the fairy tale is often dismissed as children's literature, its prevalence over thousands of years in societies across the globe reveals the cultural and psychological significance of narrative in general. As Cristina Bacchilega writes, no matter how much fairy tale is "belittled," it nevertheless manages "to accomplish a variety of social functions" for adults and children alike (3).

Recently, popular culture has witnessed the appropriation of fairy tales as adult texts in the form of postmodern fairy tales. Through the modes of film, television, and literature, classic tales a parent might read to a child have been revisited and rewritten, whether to complicate, challenge, or update their original themes for a new audience. One clear exemplar of the postmodern fairy tale is the television series *Once Upon a Time*, which self-consciously modifies the plots and characters of well-known tales to suggest an alternative version of the fairy tale's defining characteristic: the happy ending.

The series *Once Upon a Time* manipulates the narrative construction of time, rejecting linearity as a core characteristic of the traditional fairytale plot and the Labovian narrative itself. The program's post-

modern approach to temporality, in conjunction with its exploitation of the fairytale canon, complicates the traditional conception of the happy ending and reveals its significance in modern-day narrative. In redefining the happy ending for a postmodern audience, *Once Upon a Time* reveals one of the diverse functions of narrative as a way to find closure and meaning in a reality that is far from Fairyland.

In the analysis that follows, I utilize a diverse body of research to examine how the postmodern portrayal of time in *Once Upon a Time* complicates the conception of the happy ending and illuminates its function in narrative. First, I describe the elements of the fairytale genre and explore the differences between a traditional fairy tale and a postmodern fairy tale, classifying *Once Upon a Time* as the latter. Drawing from Bacchilega's *Postmodern Fairy Tales* and Tiffin's *Marvelous Geometry*, I investigate the postmodern fairy tale and the series *Once Upon a Time* as a metanarrative. Then, using Ames' characterization of popular television programs, I explain how the genres of the postmodern fairy tale and the television series overlap to contribute to the complication of fairytale norms. Finally, I show how the nonlinear construction of time in *Once Upon a Time* modifies the traditional happy ending for a postmodern audience. Due to the complexity of the series' plot after more than three seasons on the air, I focus on the pilot episode of the first season of *Once Upon a Time* in my analysis. Although I draw some evidence from later episodes to discuss how the conceptions of time and the happy ending evolve over the course of the series, the first episode, which establishes the narrative framework of the series, offers sufficient evidence for most points of my analysis.

While most people could identify what Tiffin calls "fairy-tale themes," fairy tale as a genre resists a strict definition apart from a description of its elements (26). Bruno Bettelheim emphasizes magic as a major element of the fairy tale or fairy story, a magic that exists without explanation, yet does not purport to be plausible or realistic. According to Bettelheim, "fairy stories do not pretend to describe the world as it is, nor do they advise what one ought to do," even though another distinguishing trait of fairy tales is their unambiguous moral distinction between good and evil (25). The fairy tale does not delineate a

moral code so much as it suggests that such a code can be an effective tool for facing the real world. Finally, Bettelheim separates fairy tale from myth by characterizing their respective endings: while myths generally end in tragedy, fairy tales unfailingly end with a version of "happily ever after" (37). Although Bettelheim's work concerns fairy tale as a resource for children on the path to psychological maturity, his analysis of classic fairy tales provides a loose definition of the genre that encompasses both traditional and postmodern versions.

Some characteristics of the classic fairy tale, however, do not translate to postmodern renditions of the stories. According to Bacchilega, postmodern fairy tales "hold mirrors to the magic mirror of the fairy tale," not only updating the details of the well-known narratives for the current audience, but exposing the flaws and gaps in the original "narrative and gender ideologies" (23, 50). By retelling traditional tales with a contemporary twist, these versions of fairy tales self-consciously critique their own tired motifs and render age-old tales applicable to contemporary life. This self-consciousness, and thus the classification of postmodern fairy tale as metanarrative, relies on Bruner's concept of genericity (14). Bruner tells us that genres are simultaneously "loose but conventional ways of representing human plights" and "ways of telling that predispose us to use our minds and sensibilities in particular ways" (15). Therefore, we recognize fairy tales through both their familiar plots and their conventionalized forms. As metanarratives, postmodern fairy tales employ the genre's familiarity and interactions with its own "highly structured tradition" in their "postmodern deconstructions" of classic themes (Tiffin 3). Tiffin asserts that the postmodern fairy tale can "acknowledge and reproduce some characteristics [of traditional fairy tales] while self-consciously choosing to reject or modify others," maintaining the fairytale structure just enough to be recognizable as a reinterpretation (8, 3).

The television program *Once Upon a Time* serves as a prototypical postmodern fairy tale in today's popular culture. The program's premise is introduced by the text that appears on the screen at the onset of

the series' first episode:[1]

> Once Upon a Time
> There was an enchanted forest filled with all the classic characters we know.
> Or think we know.
> One day they found themselves trapped in a place where all their happy endings were stolen.
> Our World.
> This is how it happened… (Horowitz, Pilot)

The series opener exhibits the metafictional aspect of postmodern fairy tale as well as the complication of traditional plots. The phrase, "Or think we know" appears in the same frame as the sentence referring to "all the classic characters we know," but approximately five seconds later, first establishing the program's relationship to traditional fairy tale before problematizing it. *Once Upon a Time* relies upon its title as a recognizable cue for the initiation of a fairy tale, assuming that the audience registers that the "classic characters" mentioned in the opening text are fairytale characters. Therefore, *Once Upon a Time* employs fairytale tropes to establish the viewer's expectations before any other audiovisual content appears. The series later breaches the expectations created by the fairytale canon to construct a narrative, or metanarrative, that is both unique and tellable (Bruner 11). Furthermore, the opening text echoes Bettelheim's characterization of fairy tale in its acceptance of magic: the second frame of the episode refers to "the enchanted forest" almost in passing, suggesting that the existence of magic in the story world should be both expected and unquestioned by the audience, once again relying upon the banality of fairy tale for the viewer's accommodation. In the episode's third frame, the opening text accomplishes its final purpose by signaling acknowledgement of the central tenet of fairy tale, the happy ending. By establishing that the fairytale characters, or their postmodern reinterpretations, have been trapped in a new world where "all their happy endings [have been] stolen," the text invokes the viewer's preconceived notions of happy ending and indicates that they will be modified by the subsequent narrative. Throughout the series, *Once*

1. The text appears in white font on a black backdrop with no audio accompaniment.

Upon a Time draws upon viewers' knowledge of classic fairy tales to redefine happy endings in a world apart from the enchanted forest, "Our World."

Later in the first episode, *Once Upon a Time* blatantly draws attention to its identity as a metanarrative, a fairy tale about fairy tales, through the character of Mary Margaret. As the postmodern incarnation of Snow White, Mary Margaret plays a crucial role in the series. At the beginning of the narrative, Mary Margaret, along with the other residents of the Enchanted Forest, has been transported to the real world by the Evil Queen, losing her memory in the process. The lives of familiar characters like Red Riding Hood, the Huntsman, Rumpelstiltskin, Snow White, and her Prince Charming intertwine in the Enchanted Forest, constructing a complex postmodern modification of well-known fairytale plots. As stated in the opening of the pilot episode, the Queen rewrites these traditional tales and steals the characters' happy endings by transporting them to Storybrooke, Maine, a fictional town in the United States, where they forget their origins and connections with one another. However, Mary Margaret discovers a book of fairy tales that describes her past and that of the other residents, a physical manifestation of the series' metanarrative. Mary Margaret serendipitously gives the storybook to the Queen's adopted son, Henry. Even though he was born in the "real world," Henry realizes that the stories relate actual events that have taken place in a different reality from his own. Unaware of the storybook's literal truth, Mary Margaret considers the fairy tales "a way for us to deal with our world, a world that doesn't always make sense" (Horowitz, Pilot 29:00). With this statement, Mary Margaret expresses one of the functions of fairy tale and of narrative itself, validating the series' interpretation of the genre and rendering it an example of metanarrative, a story about the power of narrative.

While the numerous plotlines and characters of *Once Upon a Time* do not readily lend themselves to summarization, an explanation of some of the major characters and relationships will be useful for understanding my later argument. Notably, Henry's birth mother in *Once Upon a Time* happens to be the show's protagonist and the

daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming, sent to the real world as an infant just before the curse strikes. Prophesied to save the residents of Storybrooke from the curse and restore the happy endings, the protagonist, Emma, grows up an orphan who knows nothing of her fairytale heritage. However, Henry, the child she gave up for adoption, discovers her identity through the enchanted storybook. Now ten years old, Henry appears outside of her apartment on her twenty-eighth birthday and convinces her to accompany him back to Storybrooke. Through realizing that the fairy tales in the book are true, Emma finally breaks the curse and restores the memories of the residents, triumphing over the Evil Queen and reuniting her family.

Since *Once Upon a Time* is not only a postmodern fairy tale, but a popular television series, the program's structure adheres closely to Ames' characteristics of "programs currently creating the most engaged fan communities," including "multiple plot threads (often stopping and starting up again) spanning large durations of time, a thickening of characterization and a multiplication of cast members, and a heavy reliance on audience intellect" (8). These distinguishing traits contribute to the series' postmodern construction of fairy tale and happy endings. While fairy tales in the traditional sense generally include a clear plotline, morally unambiguous characters, and linear temporality, *Once Upon a Time* complicates these conventions as well as the traditional plots themselves through the characters' interconnected stories. Since the narrative locates characters from traditionally disparate fairy tales in one place, the relationships between characters grow more complex, blurring the distinction between "good" and "evil." Furthermore, with multiple, simultaneous plotlines, *Once Upon a Time* not only rewrites classic fairy tales to connect to one another, but also challenges the "linearity of plot" that Tiffin claims "characterizes fairy tale" (12).

Playing with narrative temporality in this way allows the series to construct a new story out of familiar tales. In every episode, *Once Upon a Time* oscillates between the present plot, generally following Emma and Henry, and a retrospective telling of events that have occurred prior to the present action and have some causal or the-

matic relationship to it. For example, the temporality of the pilot episode alternates between the events immediately leading up to the Evil Queen's curse on the Enchanted Forest and the night, more than twenty-eight years later, when Henry finds Emma (Horowitz, Pilot). The series' nonlinear construction of time contributes to the intricate network of relationships among traditionally unrelated fairy tales and their characters. Consequently, the present-day setting of the main plot thread is not the only element that updates the classic tales for a twenty-first century audience: the narrative's form speaks to the fragmented nature of the postmodern self. In a "culture of instantaneity," the technological innovations that allow us to interact with anyone around the globe make our own social relationships much more complex than those in a classic children's tale, complicating the "plotlines" of our life narratives (Ames 9). Therefore, the structure of *Once Upon a Time* relates the fragmented adventures of its characters to the viewers' lives, promising that the fragments fit together into one coherent, overarching narrative that, undoubtedly, leads to a happy ending in one way or another.

Adding to the already complicated temporality generated by its various plotlines, the series occasionally suspends time. For instance, when the curse transports the fairytale characters from the Enchanted Forest to Storybrooke, they continue to live from day to day, though they never age. Furthermore, the characters have no long-term memory of the past, only false identities generated by the Queen's magic, and therefore no historicity. As Henry tells Emma when they arrive in Storybrooke, "time's frozen here" (Horowitz, Pilot 16:10). With no history and no direction for their future, the characters remain suspended in the present, symbolized by their failure to age. Moreover, the clock tower in Storybrooke remains frozen at 8:15. Only when Emma decides to comply with Henry's wishes and stay in town, beginning her journey from doubt to belief that will ultimately break the curse, do the hands of the clock move again. By suspending the characters in time, the Evil Queen not only erases their knowledge of the past but, as the prologue promises, steals their "happy endings," implying that such an ending is impossible without moving forward

in time. With the symbolic movement of the clock's hands as Emma takes her first step in restoring the happy endings, the narrative signals that time has started moving forward again for the residents of Storybrooke. In *Once Upon a Time*, the progression of time signals the transition from stagnancy to change. According to Ames, "although time may stand still narratively on occasion, it always progresses in terms of the world"; therefore, the series constructs a variable temporality that occasionally "freezes" or progresses in a nonlinear fashion, but a change in the characters' situation and thus the eventual forward motion of time is inevitable, as in our own reality (163).

As Bacchilega points out, "the stories we tell produce and find us in the past, and enable us to live through the present's uncertainties by projecting us into the future" (24). The nonlinear temporality of *Once Upon a Time* reflects the human experience of the world, specifically a postmodern representation of that experience, and offers closure with the assurance that time still has direction. This direction propels us, as characters in our own narratives, from one ending to a new beginning. For example, the pilot episode begins with the happy ending of the classic tale of Snow White, when Prince Charming wakes her from eternal sleep with "true love's kiss." When considered with the paradox of time starting again as Emma begins her quest to "bring back the happy endings," it becomes clear that beginnings and endings merge in both the series' construction of time and its reconstruction of the happy ending. Like the fairytale characters trapped in Storybrooke, the narrative implies that we need to continue moving towards the future if we are to experience "happily ever after." The postmodern fairy tale and metanarrative of *Once Upon a Time* offer reassurance that the fragmented past and present yield a meaningful future, as the end of one adventure signals the beginning of another. The happy ending, therefore, is that life goes on.

The most common type of happy ending, in traditional and postmodern fairy tales alike, manifests this element of continuity: the attainment of true love. According to Bettelheim, the happy ending "dissipate[s] the fear of death" by affirming the possibility of never-ending love (11). In *Once Upon a Time*, Snow White and Prince

Charming have a mantra that they "always find each other"; when, in the first season finale, the curse is broken and they remember their love for one another, Snow White declares, "You found me!" (Horowitz, A Land 38:26). With the recurring motif of losing and then finding each other again, Snow and Charming exhibit the continuity promised by the happy ending. The attainment of true love implies the beginning of a relationship that will last indefinitely, ensuring contentment in the future if not a form of eternal life. As Bettelheim argues, the promise of everlasting adult love helps children to cope with mortality through the static perpetuity of the traditional happy ending. On the other hand, the postmodern fairy tale appeals to the contemporary audience by framing the happy ending as a cycle of life's conflicts and resolutions, made meaningful by "true love."

The reinterpretation of classic fairytale characters reconfigures another aspect of the traditional fairytale ending: the realization of justice. In most traditional fairy tales, only the protagonists, the morally superior "good" characters, have the privilege of a happy ending; in fact, the generic ending "and they lived happily ever after" implies that "they" refers only to the heroes while the villains have been defeated once and for all, punished not necessarily by death, but by the denial of a happy ending. *Once Upon a Time* partially conforms to this convention, as conveyed by Mary Margaret's conviction that "good will always win" over evil (Horowitz, Pilot 37:14). Nonetheless, the series qualifies this assertion by muddling the distinction between good and evil: so-called heroes sometimes make mistakes, commit murderous acts, or succumb to their human selfishness. Likewise, characters traditionally considered villains are given backstories which reveal that they were not always evildoers, merely characters with good intentions in unfortunate circumstances who gave in to human weakness for power or revenge. Regina, known as the Evil Queen, articulates the series' portrayal of villains, claiming that "evil isn't born, it's made… and so is good" (Chambliss 34:02). The implication that "evil" characters, like heroes, have been shaped by their choices and circumstances suggests that their lost humanity can be regained. The characters of Rumpelstiltskin and Regina best illustrate this potential

for change. In the third season of *Once Upon a Time*, Rumpelstiltskin expresses the conventional reasoning of the fairytale ending, lamenting, "… I'm a villain. And villains don't get happy endings" (Horowitz, Going Home 27:52). However, in the act of sacrificing himself to save the town from a different villain, Rumpelstiltskin fulfills the role of the hero and earns a second chance at a happy ending, later manifested in a kind of rebirth.

Regina also demonstrates the moral ambiguity of characters in *Once Upon a Time*: toward the end of the series' third season, Regina joins forces with Emma, Prince Charming, and Snow White, the series' original protagonists, to defeat the Wicked Witch of the West, eliciting Henry's assertion, "You've changed. You're a hero now" (Chambliss 22:46). By complicating the fairy tale's one-sided characterization of villains, *Once Upon a Time* reflects the multiplicity of the postmodern self. In its provocative argument that villains, too, can have happy endings, *Once Upon a Time* further complicates the traditional ending with the proposition that different characters can have nonconflicting happy endings in their own right. Moreover, the reframing of the "happy ending" as continuous rather than final assures the audience that transformation is ever possible. A happy ending in the postmodern fairy tale is thus reinterpreted as a second chance rather than a final judgment.

Through its nonlinear temporality and status as a metanarrative, *Once Upon a Time* modifies the traditional happy ending to suit the postmodern conception of the world, rendering it more meaningful for a twenty-first century audience. However, the series also chooses to accept some of the classic conventions of the happy ending, emphasizing the timelessness of the tradition. The traditional happy ending as a conclusive event leading to an unchanging state maintains its relevance today by validating the hope of positive outcomes in our own autobiographical narratives. There is a need "to have something to look forward to, to anticipate future outcomes based on past and present activity" (Dunnigan). Happy endings fulfill that need: the fairy tale provides a mode of anticipating future outcomes by evaluating human actions in a vastly altered context, the enchanted world

reflecting, as Tiffin states, "essential human experiences" (11). Tiffin also asserts that classic fairytale endings create closure through "an artificial oversimplification… rather different from the messy, ongoing matters of real life" (14).

On the other hand, the postmodern fairy tale of *Once Upon a Time* offers closure through its parallels with messy reality. Through its fragmented temporality and subsequent reframing of the happy ending, the series *Once Upon a Time* creates a sense that its story has no ending, only a continuity that mirrors the human experience. As in our own life narratives, every resolution in *Once Upon a Time*, through the passage of time itself, leads to a new complication. Nevertheless, the protagonists do not lose hope of regaining their happiness: Snow White and Prince Charming will find each other, Emma will reunite her family, good will overcome evil. With the continuity that may characterize the postmodern "happy ending" as a "happy new beginning" comes the hope that even those who have committed villainous acts can achieve self-redemption and earn the right to happiness. *Once Upon a Time* therefore perpetuates the optimistic worldview of the fairy tale, suggesting that righteous acts are ultimately rewarded and malicious actions are ultimately punished, while breaking down the categories of "good" and "evil" to suggest that everyone has the option to become a "hero" and therefore live a fulfilling life.

The characterization of happy ending in *Once Upon a Time* exposes the desire for stability and closure in an ever-changing, postmodern world. Through the continuity of the happy ending, the narrative assures the audience that while the stability of one happy ending may be lost, it can be regained through the next happy ending, or "happy new beginning." As Mary Margaret confirms, "believing in even the possibility of a happy ending is a very powerful thing" (Horowitz, Pilot 29:37). The magic of the postmodern fairy tale, therefore, does not reside solely in fairy dust and curses, but in its power as a narrative to give meaning to the fragmented components of human life and to promise that, essentially, we will all live happily ever after.

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