Into the Woods to Find Our Identity and Make Up Our Minds

The use of fairy tale characters in *Into the Woods,*[1] the book's post-modern reading of what living "happily ever after means," its delving into the darker areas of self-identity, its use of the blame game to show how hard it is for us to take responsibility for our lives (mistakes), and its muted affirmation of a blended family in the wake of indiscretion, failed marriages, and growing up is what drew me to this book.

Oedipal Complexes

One of the first things that struck me was the ways that the fairy tale characters were caught up in Oedipal complexes. Jack could not fully grow up until his mother had died. Rapunzel was fated with never being able to grow up because of the stringent control that her mother, the Witch, had on her. The Baker's father, Mysterious Man, made his appearance as a dead apparition at the most inopportune times. He made amends for himself while complicating things for his son. Red Riding Hood could not grow up until her grandmother had replaced her red cloak with a wolf skin coat. Cinderella could not grow up until the tree by her mother's grave was destroyed and she discovered the philandering ways of her charming Prince husband.

These dynamics illustrate the challenges of "deciding alone" with "only me beside you," a theme of this chapter.[2] In spite of the fact that Jack proved his worth by climbing the beanstalk, stealing gold, a hen, and a harp from the giants, making his mother rich beyond her wildest dreams, and killing the first giant, his mother continued to treat him like a child. In the middle of the second Act, she exclaims:[3]

> You're still a little boy in your mother's eyes.
> I want you to promise, Promise (not to leave your surroundings).

She was afraid of what the second giant would do to him.

A similar fate awaits Rapunzel, who runs hysterically off into the sunset with her two children. She cannot handle the power that her mother has over her. After

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[1] James Lapine, *Into the Woods*. I am referencing the book while being aware of its differences from the movie version, *Into the Woods*, DVD (Walt Disney Studios, 2015).
[2] James Lapine, *Into the Woods*, pp. 128-132.
[3] Ibid., p. 92.

telling her to "Stay here," the Witch bemoans Rapunzel's subsequent death under the feet of the giant:[4]

> Couldn't you listen? Couldn't you stay content, safe behind walls, as I could not? . . . No matter what you say, children won't listen, No matter what you know, children refuse to learn (You will only lose them in the end).

In spite of her marriage to a Prince, Rapunzel was unable to transfer her affections to him so that she would be rid of her mother's voice for ever.[5]

Red Riding Hood's destiny is more fortuitous as a result of her bracing encounter with the wolf along with the bravery of her grandmother. The Baker's rescue of her and her grandmother from the stomach of the wolf has the desired effect. Red Riding Hood learns how to fend for herself and become a woman. She carries a knife and dons a wolf-skin cloak, brandishing the weapon when Jack comes upon her at the end of Act I.[6] She calls his bluff by daring Jack to climb back up the beanstalk to retrieve the harp that he gloats about. A possible budding love interest between these two adolescent teenagers is left to the imagination.

Cinderella dillies and dailies because she cannot make up her mind about why she wants to go to the Ball. She wants to go because her step-mother and step-sisters are going. She wants to go because it sounds so exciting to meet a Prince. She wants to get away from her drudgery.

None of these factors is enough to convince her that the Prince will fulfill her desires. The audacity of a poverty-stricken girl to wish after royalty is precisely that, delusional thinking. Cinderella decides while dithering that she will put the shoe on the other foot. The prince will have to decide if she is really worth it. She leaves her slipper as a tempting clue.[7]

In spite of her subsequent marriage, dream fulfillment of living in a castle, and sense of contentment, Cinderella is not happy. After sending the Prince off to look for the second giant, she decides to go back into the woods to find the missing pieces of her life. She is met by a giant, by the need of Red Riding Hood to be comforted, by the need of the Baker to have someone look after his son, and by the discovery that her Prince Charming is a philanderer, not only with the Baker's wife, but with Sleeping Beauty and Snow White as well.

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[4] Ibid., pp. 105-106.
[5] At the end of Act I, Rapunzel's Prince has to pull her away from her mother, ibid., p. 73.
[6] Ibid., pp. 61-62.
[7] Ibid., p. 64.

To say that Cinderella grows as a result of these events is an understatement. If growing up is defined as that which you become after that-which-you-became comes undone, then one could say that Cinderella has grown up. She rejects the reconciling advances of her husband Prince because of his inability to grow up. She becomes a mother figure to Red Riding Hood. She becomes a willing compatriot -- significant other -- of the Baker because he needs someone to take care of himself, his son, and his house. Cinderella realises in that instance that she is indeed a cleaning woman, albeit reborn.

The Baker is an ambiguous figure because of his dithering ways, his inability to make decisions, the Witch's curse of barrenness placed on him and his wife, the actions of his father that caused the curse, and the continuing omnipresence of his father in shadowy form. The Baker tries to reform his ways by going into the forest in search of four required items to reverse the curse. He tells his wife to stay home in order to protect her. He brushes off "vague suggestions" by his father figure.

The Baker finds it difficult to fulfill tasks on his own. He and his wife argue about any number of things until they realise that doing things together is better. They learn through their adventure in the woods that their mutual objective can be fulfilled through greater respect, patience, and affirmation of each other.[8]

This newfound focus and confidence by both parties does not last long. In spite of collecting all four objects, reversing the curse by feeding them to the cow, birthing a son, and living happily as bakers and parents, the future is not certain. The Baker remains unsure of himself as a parent. The baby continues to cry when he holds it. When faced with the death of his wife and defeating a giant, the Baker runs away, telling himself that avoiding responsibility is better than facing it.

The Oedipal nature of this insecurity is revealed in the Baker's subsequent dialogue with his Dad's shadowy appearance. His father ran away from his guilt of having brought on the curse. He became the Mysterious Man because of his need to be invisible. The Baker is doing the same thing, running away from grief at his wife's death and insecurity at having to be responsible.[9]

The Baker comes to his senses in spite of it all. He returns to Jack, Red Riding Hood, and Cinderella as much to be with his son as to help them out. They decide together on a plan to defeat the giant. With this task complete, the play ends with the five of them becoming a family that support each other and live together in the

[8] Ibid., pp., 54-55.
[9] Ibid., pp. 123-125.

Baker's home. Whether this community includes a love interest between the Baker and Cinderella, and between Red Riding Hood and Jack is left to the imagination.

Post-Modern Nature of the Tale

Post-modernity represents a second theme of the book. Although most of the characters overcome their Oedipal complexes and become independent of their parents, they do so in a post-modern way.[10] What do I mean by this? The easiest way to explain it is to take the example of Cinderella. After she fulfilled her modern dream of marrying the Prince and living in a castle in the first Act, she becomes part of a post-modern family in the second Act. She agrees to help the Baker raise his son. She re-embraces a negative aspect of her past life as a cleaning lady in order to become family and community to the Baker, Red Riding Hood, and Jack. She is able to do this after the destruction of her mother's grave and discovery of the philandering ways of her husband. These negative experiences galvanize Cinderella into reinventing and reaffirming aspects of herself. This journey represents the death of a modern fantasy in favour of a thoroughgoing mundane and contented existence.

This is how commentator Robert McLaughlin describes the process:[11]

> . . . at the same time the characters are moving narratively forward in pursuit of their wishes, many of them are motivated by a contrary desire to move narratively backward so as to repair their damaged, fractured families, and reclaim their prefragmented, presocialized, pre-adulthood selves, selves that are marked by a peaceful, contented, holistic unit. The unity here is connected not just to an infant's relationship with the mother but is also a complex family unit: mother, father, child, and home.

A similar transformation happens to other characters. Jack becomes more manly after the death of his mother by coming up with a plan to kill the giant. In response to Jack's desire to kill the Steward for killing his mother, the Baker affirms the need for the Steward to be punished while suggesting that killing is wrong. The fact that Jack listens – and evidently obeys -- the Baker represents a more mature

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[10] Olaf Jubin explains the post-modern nature of the tale in relation to death of the Narrator half-way through Act II. After the Narrator pleads with the characters that he is the only one as an objective observer who knows "the proper ending of the story," the Witch pushes him into the path of the Giant. According to Jubin, the death of the narrator makes the "disorientation and confusion of the characters become *our* confusion," making their moral decisions "easier to relate to and easier to evaluate," Olaf Jubin, *Sondheim and Lapine's Into the Woods* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 36. We have moved from the thoroughly modern tale of Act I, in which characters live happily ever because they have fulfilled their deepest desires, to the post-modern tale of Act II, where the unexpected malaise of a routinized existence of contentment furnishes the wherewithal for characters to enter the woods again, to see what they can see.

[11] Robert McLaughlin, *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), p. 171.

attitude on his part to adult authority figures. Jack has progressed from an infantile Oedipal relationship with his mother to internalizing values of authority and justice.

Red Riding Hood fulfills her post-modern destiny when Cinderella comforts her upon the death of her grandmother. While acknowledging that she is "now alone" and that she will have to "decide alone," Cinderella tells Red Riding Hood that she will be making these decisions with Cinderella "beside her."[12]

The idea that "no-one is alone" does not mean that everyone is in this together. Only Red Riding Hood knows what it was like to have been raped and eaten by a wolf, to become an adult with a knife at her side, and to lose her mother and grandmother. While sharing grief with Cinderella, Red Riding Hood alone experiences despair and loneliness at being abandoned. Post-modernity means living bravely in an imperfect world, where bad things happen to us and we make bad decisions. We have to come to terms with them in the solitude of our existence.

The Baker's grief over the death of his wife galvanizes him into responsibility after a brief bout of self-pity and avoidance. He realises that there is no one else who can defeat the giant. As the oldest member of the group, a recent widower, and a father who loves his son, the Baker inspires other members of the group to come up with a plan. Cinderella calls on the birds to help them, the Baker suggests spreading pitch on the ground, and Jack comes up with the idea of climbing a tree and hitting the giant with a club.

After the giant is dead, the Baker accepts the help of his compatriots in spite of himself. After protesting that he does not need help and that his house is in shambles, the Baker realises his mistake. Comradery in the face of danger, companionship in the face of loneliness, and parenting in the face of death represent the post-modern nature of this tale. A blended family of solidarity has replaced the biological logic of filial love.

Disassembling Moments in the Context of Self-Identity

We come to a third important theme of the book. An Oedipal complex represents the backdrop of the fairy tale characters becoming mature. Post-modernity represents the denouement of modern ideals gone askew. Neither of these ideas adequately explains how this reinterpretation and reclamation of identity and purpose are actualized. What gives these fairy tale characters the capacity, willpower, and willingness to embrace common companionship with strangers when so much has gone wrong? Why cannot these people "take care of themselves," as the Baker

[12] James Lapine, *Into the Woods*, pp. 128-132.

suggests to Jack when Jack laments that he has no-one to take care of him now that his mother has died?[13]

The first answer comes when everyone is blaming each other for the arrival of the second giant. The difficulty of accepting responsibility for times when we are less than good is shown in plain view. I was struck by this extended deflection on the part of all the characters because I have worked with inmates who are masters at playing the blame game. I repeatedly tell them: spread the blame as widely as possible so you have to take less responsibility for your part.

The characters do an admirable job of tracing the source of the problem to the person next to them. The blame goes from Jack who planted the beans, to the Baker who gave them to him, to the Witch who cursed the house, to the Baker's father who stole the beans, to the Baker's wife who pocketed an extra bean, to Cinderella who threw the bean away. Each person finds a way of linking the arrival of the giant to their neighbour.

After circling the wagons one more time, bringing the issue back to Jack and his mother, then to Red Riding Hood, and finally to the Witch who planted the beans -– the Witch stops the deflections by taking responsibility. After talking about a possible apocalypse that could take place as a result of what has happened, the Witch disappears in a swirl of magic. The Witch becomes invisible after returning to the ugliness that she was as a result of her mother's punishment for having lost the beans.[14] Is it any wonder that no one wants to take the blame? There are consequences for erring on the side of wrong and evil.

After the Witch has taken the punishment for them all, some of the characters admit that they should not have "stolen from the giant," "strayed from the path," or "attended the Ball." They are willing to take responsibility for their small part in the overall catastrophe that has occurred.

Another dimension of "no-one being alone" is now evident. Many of the offenders with whom I worked were unable to take other people's feelings into account when they committed their crimes. In fact, the offenders had to suspend any empathy at all in order to offend against their victims. They considered themselves to be the only ones that mattered in this situation. Owning up to the fact that their actions caused a ripple effect of hurt that would go on for a long time represented a beginning for inmates to understand the amount of harm and grief they had caused. The social and moral consequences of these men's actions are what James Lapine is trying to communicate in his statement that "no-one is alone."

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[13] Ibid., p. 134.
[14] Ibid., pp. 114-122.

A second part of this transformation has to do with the fact that identities become disassembled and life choices ruined because of the lure of momentary pleasures. The woods represent a place where anything can happen. Innocence is lost in the case of Red Riding Hood. The Baker and his wife succeed in having a child. Rapunzel and Cinderella meet and marry their true loves. Jack and his mother become exceedingly rich. The Witch is turned back into a woman of beauty because of her willingness to reverse the curse.

Liminality, in which the inviting threshold of newness and otherness offers opportunities for success, can have the opposite effect. The woods represent obsession, allure, danger, and momentary excitement as much as they offer timely fulfillment and happiness. The characters find this out for themselves when they are faced with a second giant who comes to seek her revenge. Death lurks in the midst of this situation: Red Riding Hood's mother and grandmother, Jack's mother, the Narrator, Rapunzel, and the Baker's wife. Other dark aspects of existence are revealed. Rapunzel can not live in contentment with her prince and two children. The Princes can not live with only one wife. The Baker does not know how to love his son.

An understanding of disassembling moments is illustrated by a character who has not been analysed in relation to Oedipal complexes and post-modernity, the Baker's wife. The parents of the Baker's wife are not mentioned. The Baker's wife does not live long enough to demonstrate her ability to live in a post-modern world. She is killed falling down a cliff after having a tryst with Cinderella's Prince.

A commentator has suggested that this death is, indeed, a high price to pay for an indiscretion.[15] The Baker's wife's obsession about Princes and the Ball is given free rein when Cinderella's Prince interprets her interest as desire. They make love even as the Baker's wife remains confused about whose story she is in and which identity she has retained.[16]

The point of the affair has less to do with its tragic consequences for the Baker's wife (we will get to that later) than with what the moment of infatuation and obsession means. After the incident, the Baker's wife exclaims:[17]

> Oh, if life were made of moments,
> Even now and then a bad one --!
> But if life were only moments,

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[15] Olaf Jubin, *Sondheim and Lapine's Into the Woods*, pp. 40-41.
[16] James Lapine, *Into the Woods,* p. 109.
[17] Ibid., pp. 112-113.

Then you'd never know you had one.

Life is made up of *both/and* as well as *either/or*. The fact that the Baker's wife had an affair with the Prince and is still in love and wants to be faithful to her husband illustrates the *both/and* of life. *Either/or* has to do with the fact that marrying her husband set boundaries for her life, forfeiting her desire to "go into the woods" for a second time. The woods are too alluring, too liminal, too inviting, too suggestive, too unknown, too dark, too dangerous. Red Riding Hood found this out for herself when she was set upon by a wolf in the first Act. The other characters found this out for themselves when they were confronted by a female giant in the second Act.

Either/or means that life is made up of *either* moments *or* a continuous existence. Living in the moment means that that moment becomes more important than anything else. I can speak to this existential reality in my work with offenders. They reduced their lives to the one moment when they killed their wives, raped a young girl, sold drugs for money, were enforcers in a gang, or robbed a bank. In the same way that the Baker's wife's identity as spouse, mother, businesswoman, and care giver was disassembled at the moment of the affair, these offenders have one criminal act to remember in the face of their disassembling selves.

Impulsivity, premeditation, unconscious desires, revenge, momentary pleasure, and obsession reduced the once respectable husband, businessman, father, and community leader to nothing but the deed done. The Baker's wife's epitaph of "never knowing you had a moment" comes true. There are no moments to remember if there is nothing left of one's continuous existence called normality and self-identity into which to place that moment. It was only a moment, and a moment is all it will ever be . . . except for the punishment that is inflicted on that continuous existence and self-identity known as a real offender (and the hurt that victims and society experience for a long time).

The death of the Baker's wife appears a little harsh from a literary point of view. She is, after all, a main character. At the same time, there is a clear reason for her demise. Each of the characters left on stage after the death of the second giant has lost a significant other: Jack -- his mother, Cinderella – the tree by her mother's grave, Red Riding Hood -- her mother and grandmother, and the Baker – his wife as well as his father, the Mysterious Man.

These four remaining characters are brought together as much by grief as by mutual need and cooperation. The common cause of fighting the giant is what sparked the initial community affair. What keeps the story going is the fact that Jack, Cinderella, Red Riding Hood, and the Baker are grieving the loss of loved ones. The

consequences of grief become abundantly clear in Cinderella's talk with Red Riding Hood. Cinderella exclaims that although she will always be "beside" her, Cinderella cannot make the hard choices of life on Red Riding Hood's behalf. "Now you're on your own . . . you decide what's good, you decide alone."[18]

The same scenario is repeated with the Baker and Jack. After Jack utters despair at the death of his mother, the Baker consoles him as well as cautions him regarding the Steward's punishment. The song sung as a communal response by the four remaining characters includes these lines:[19]

> Someone is on your side.
> Our side.
> Our side –
> Someone is not
> While we're seeing our side.
> Our side --
> Our side . . .
> Our side –
> Maybe we forgot;
> They are not alone.
> No one is alone.

Not being alone is brought home in visual form in the last scene. Cinderella becomes Red Riding Hood's surrogate mother while the Baker becomes Jack's surrogate father. Both children, having become adults, welcome the care and affection of their substitute parents. Cinderella learns to be a mother and the Baker learns to be a father to his (their) son. It is a new role for all of them.

The post-modern ending has as much to do with self-identity and the dangers of disassembling moments as with reconfiguration of modern ideals. While post-modern life is necessary in the face of losses, death, grief, and negative experiences, the assurance that self-identity will survive and flourish is not a given.

Neither the Witch nor Rapunzel, neither the Baker's wife nor Jack's mother, neither the two Giants nor the Narrator survive their experiences in the woods. I have met many people like these latter folks. Some of the men that I have worked with have survived – or not.

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[18] Ibid., pp. 128-130.
[19] Ibid., pp. 131-132.

At the same time, *Into the Woods* offers the opportunity of modern success reconceived as acceptance of loss and reconfigured familial loyalties. Post-modernity can flourish in the midst of muted ideals and communal fellowship.

Conclusion

The point of this analysis has be to show that oedipal complexes can be overcome, past decisions do not have to define our future, and self-identity can be retained in the midst of disassembling moments that threaten to derail our lives. Desires and wish-fulfillments are necessary factors in our drive for success. Our ability to achieve these goals does not obviate the fact that life is much richer – and messier – than we first surmised. Act II of *Into the Woods* was written to illustrate the post-Disney facts of our lives. Post-modern reconstructions of brokenness enable us to be restored to wholeness.