

The Dichotomies Between “Once Upon a Time” and “Happily Every After”

Thematic Development in Sondheim and Lapine’s *Into the Woods*

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Outline

Thesis: A journey into the woods is a journey into some sort of trial, some sort of challenge. Through individual journeys, Little Red, Jack, Cinderella, and the Baking couple change as they grasp three primary themes, each involving a distinction: What is *nice* is not necessarily what is *good*. What is *exciting* is often *scary*, too. Most importantly, what is *bad* can often harbor bits of *good*. One end of these spectrums does not completely describe any given individual, experience, situation, etc. Further, much benefit comes from navigating these ambiguous dichotomies, a task that cannot be completed alone.

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 - B. Reactions to Disney's screen rendition
 - C. Thematic content developed through jarring plotline
- II. Act One: Individual Learning
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“Once upon a time...” This phrase is commonplace, introducing many a fairytale, including that of Cinderella, Little Red Ridinghood, Rapunzel, and Jack of the infamous beanstalk. All of these stories are coalesced into James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Into the Woods*, which boasts Tony awards for both spoken and sung script. Now a “modern classic,” *Into the Woods* premiered at San Francisco’s Old Globe Theater in 1986. Less than a year later, the show opened on Broadway and ran for 765 performances before closing in 1989 (“Into the Woods”). Since then, *Into the Woods* has been revived and adapted for a number of large-scale theatre companies, dinner theaters, children’s theaters, local schools, etc. all over the world, including my small Colorado high school.

Having performed in a rendition of *Into the Woods*, I was ecstatic when Disney began producing a screen version starring Johnny Depp, Anna Kendrick, and Meryl Streep. I counted down the days to Christmas 2014, not only in anticipation of the holiday, but also in anticipation of the movie premier. As I sat with my family in the theater that snowy afternoon, I was captivated by the high quality performing, complex plotline, and relevant thematic elements presented on the screen. My family, however, was less than thrilled: “It was all right. I liked it well enough, but it seemed to drag on forever – and what was all the questionable morality in the second half?” Many other viewers had similar reactions; some sitting in front of us left before the movie concluded. These reactions are entirely understandable. The plotline proves jarring, toying with each character’s contrived happily-ever-after and twisting familiar plotlines until one’s comfortable, childhood nostalgia is disturbed. When these characters enter the woods, their stories are changed and, consequently, the characters themselves are also changed.

These changes, though unsettling, prove brilliant. Sondheim and Lapine are incorporating important thematic concepts into the storyline with each alteration. Each character enters the woods alone at the beginning of the story, singing, “The way is clear. The light is good. I have

no fear, nor no one should. The woods are just trees, the trees are just wood. No need to be afraid there” (Lapine 20). In the beginning, each character’s sense of direction and morality is clear; each character’s task is simple. Little Red intends to follow the path and arrive swiftly at her grandmother’s house. Jack intends to sell his cow and return home. Cinderella intends to attend the prince’s festival. The Baker and his Wife intend to locate the four items necessary to appease the Witch and lift the curse she placed on their household. Once in the woods, though, these tasks become increasingly complicated and morality becomes skewed. By the time the credits role, the same melody wears different lyrics: “The way is dark. The light is dim. But now there's you, me, her, and him. The chances look small, the choices look grim, but everything you learn there will help when you return there” (110). The characters leave the woods claiming entirely different perspectives than those they entered with. A journey into the woods is a journey into some sort of trial, some sort of challenge. Through their individual journeys, the characters change as they grasp three primary themes, each involving a distinction: What is *nice* is not necessarily what is *good*. What is *exciting* is often *scary*, too. Most importantly, what is *bad* can often harbor bits of *good*. One end of these spectrums does not completely describe any given situation, individual, experience, etc. Further, much benefit comes from navigating these ambiguous dichotomies, a task not to be completed alone.

In the first act, each character encounters his or her trials and learns these consequent lessons individually. Little Red comes first. Throughout the song “Hello Little Girl,” the Wolf notices her “pink and plump” (23) flesh and strikes a conversation to find out where she’s headed and delay her arrival, as he wishes to eat her. Despite Little Red’s protests, quotations of her mother’s admonitions, the wolf convinces the girl to “take [her] time” and appreciate the beauty of the paths all around her, including “the flowers,” and “the birds... singing sweetly. [She’ll] miss the birds completely, [she’s] traveling so fleetly” (23). When Little Red takes his advice

and collects a bouquet for her grandmother, the wolf moves ahead, devours her grandmother, and also devours the little girl upon her late arrival.

The wolf, representative of any child predator, is the only character in the show that proves entirely evil. His actions and his motives are not pure, so he himself cannot be considered good. Though the wolf himself is evil, his advice is not; in fact, all his words to Little Red are practical and pure – one should certainly explore and find the beauty in the world! After the baker releases her from the wolf’s stomach, Little Red understands that even bad people can give good advice, for a wolf’s ideas, no matter how good they may be, do not make the wolf himself good. More generally, Little Red learns that no one experience is entirely bad or entirely good. In her song “I Know Things Now,” she explains, “I know things now, many valuable things that I hadn’t known before... take extra care with strangers, even flowers have their dangers, and though scary is exciting, nice is different than good” (34). Though Little Red would certainly not wish to be eaten by a wolf again, she recognizes that her mistake and consequent trial was not an entirely negative experience, for she “knows things now” (34).

Jack is the next to come to his realization. Jack, like little Red, learns to appreciate the beauty around him. Atop the Beanstalk, Jack is excited by all the newness he experiences, from golden coins and eggs and harps to giants. However, when one of the giants proves less-than-friendly, Jack grows “really scared being all alone” (41), and scrambles down the Beanstalk, seeing “the roof, the house, and [his] Mother at the door. The roof, the house and the world [he] never thought to explore” (42). Jack returns home and now appreciates both what he left behind and what he discovered, “[wishing he] could live in between” (42). He has a renewed love for his mother, and a sense of adventure has been born in him. Like Little Red, his growing experience taught him much, for he “[knows] things now that [he] never knew before, not ‘till the sky” (42).

Shortly after Jack, Cinderella is also faced with a growing experience “on the steps of the

palace” (59) – as her big song would suggest! Cinderella got her wish: she attended the prince’s festival and danced only with the prince for three consecutive nights. However, afraid of making a decision, she fled from the prince each night before he could ask her to marry him. As she was fleeing on the final night of the festival, she found herself “stuck to the steps of the palace,” for the prince had “spread pitch on the stairs” (59). In that moment, she could no longer avoid the decision, but had to distinguish between what was right and what was wrong for her future: “So then which do you pick: Where you're safe, out of sight, and yourself, but where everything's wrong? Or where everything's right but you know that you'll never belong?” (59). Like Little Red, Cinderella realizes that no experience is fully good or fully bad. At home, her stepmother and stepsisters abuse her, but “there’s nothing to choose so there’s nothing to loose” (59). The prince’s world of balls “is exciting and all. Once you’re there though, it’s scary” (59). Both situations have benefits and detriments, as is true of everything in life. In this moment, Cinderella learns that the dichotomy she’s always assumed was so clean-cut is anything but; however, she cunningly avoids making a direct decision regarding her realization, and, instead, she leaves her shoe and forces the Prince to decide for her. Cinderella cannot remain indecisive for long though, as an unavoidable moment of decision will come second act.

The Baker and his Wife’s moments of understanding are interspersed in between each of the fairytale characters’, as this couple unites all the stories. The Baker so wants to have a child, but he does not want to compromise his sense of right and wrong to do so. Despite the confusion inflicted by his conflicting desires, the Baker wishes to retain his morals in the woods. Thus, when Little Red gives the Baker her red cape – one of the four ingredients – as a gift of thanks, the Baker is proud of his accomplishment, having earned the little girl’s cape instead of stealing it. The Baker’s Wife has a different approach, though. She is driven solely by her desire to have a child, using immoral means to attain each of the ingredients. She lies to Jack, convincing him

to sell his cow for supposedly magic beans (though the beans turn out to be magic, after all). She rips Rapunzel's hair from her head and attempts to snatch Cinderella's shoe off her foot without explanation. In the song "Maybe They're Really Magic," (which was omitted from the movie adaptation) the Baker asks, "Are we going to dispel this curse through deceit?" His wife interjects, "Things are only what you need them for, what's important is who needs them more!" before the Baker orders her to go home (Sondheim). Do good motives justify evil actions? The couple take opposite stances, serving as each other's foil character; therefore, it logically follows that the Baker and his Wife would have separate moments of understanding, and those moments would occur in separate acts.

The Baker understands during the first act as he sings "It Takes Two." Having obtained most of the ingredients and seen his Wife's accomplishments, the Baker understands that he himself has changed because of their trials, meaning the experience was not entirely negative: "When the journey was rough it took you, it took two of us. It takes care, it takes patience and fear and despair to change" (Lapine 51). He now appreciates his wife anew, and she appreciates the changes, too: "There's something about the woods. At home, I'd fear we'd be the same forever. And then, out here..." (51). The woods, the trials the Baker has been through made him a more compassionate man, as he now understands that he and his Wife must depend on each other, that undergoing trials and learning lessons is most valuable when you have someone learning alongside you – a truth his wife has known all along!

The Baker's Wife does not understand any primary themes until the second act, and even then, understanding follows more moral confusion. Cinderella's Prince realizes that, even though he's attained Cinderella, his lust has not ceased: "I thought if you were mine, that I could not wish for more... I was raised to be charming, not sincere" (100). Thus, he decides to live in the moment, indulge his desire, and seduce the Baker's Wife. The Baker's Wife, who is already

confused in all matters regarding right and wrong, dismisses her confusion as “a trick of the woods” (87) and allows the Prince to remove the scarf her husband wrapped around her neck before they parted. Once the deed is done and the Prince leaves, she tries to rationalize the pleasure of her experience with the clear morality she claimed outside the woods, outside challenges, singing, “There are shouldn’ts and shoulds. Why not both instead? There’s the answer if you’re clever – NEVER! It’s these woods!” (86-87). Though she wishes to adopt the Prince’s philosophy and live for pleasure in the moment, she ultimately realizes that such a life is not good: “Oh, if life were made of moments, even now and then a bad one – but if life were only moments, then you’d never know you had one!” (87). Having experienced decision-making, and having made the immoral decision, she now understands that life as a whole is composed of good and bad; similarly, every experience within a lifetime is composed of good and bad. She may not have the excitement of a Prince in her daily life, but she has a Baker who offers love the Prince never could. Like all the other characters, the Baker’s Wife now understands the dichotomies between right and wrong, good and evil, exciting and scary, etc. Not only does she understand that the dichotomies exist, but she is content with her blend of each. This content is short-lived, though, as the Giant crushes her immediately after “Moments in the Woods.”

Following the Wife’s death, the Prince finds his princess alone in the woods, cradling the Baker’s son. Cinderella, who has heard from the birds that the Prince has been unfaithful, is finally forced to make a decision. Like Jack, who also wants “to live in between” (42), Cinderella wishes to find a middle ground between the dichotomies present in her life, though she recognizes that any middle ground will harbor bits of good and bad, just as the two homes she’s lived in were both good and bad: “My father’s house was a nightmare. Your house was a dream. Now I want something in-between” (100). Releasing the prince proves her “first big decision” (59), and she came to it on her own and, consequently, understands more of the world

and more of herself.

Now that the Baker, Cinderella, and Little Red have each lost someone, the characters unite to fight the Giant and protect Jack. In this trial, Little Red's realizations from the first act are tested. She learned that no one is entirely good, nor is anyone entirely bad. Thus, she struggles while preparing to kill the Giant: "[Granny and Mother] always said to make them proud. And here I am about to kill somebody... Aren't we to show forgiveness?" (102). The Giant has killed both her mother and her grandmother, making the Giant evil. But if no one is entirely evil, does anyone truly deserve to die? With her family members dead, Little Red has no admonitions to quote this time. It would seem that her experience with the Wolf, in which she had to learn on her own, has prepared her for this moment, in which she must decide what is right and what is wrong without her mother to guide her.

Jack's resolve is also tested. After returning from the land of the Giants, Jack's love for his mother was renewed. Therefore, when the Steward accidentally kills Jack's mother, Jack's heart breaks and his temper flies: "That Steward will pay for this... After we slay the Giant, I will slay him... What he done was wrong. He should be punished." (102-103). Like Little Red, Jack must decide what is right and what is wrong without his mother to guide him.

Cinderella and the Baker, having already undergone their important realizations, are able to offer wisdom in the song "No One is Alone." The older pair sympathizes with the younger pair, having just learned themselves that the distinctions between right and wrong are not always clear. When Jack definitively states that he will kill the Steward because of his wrongdoing, the Baker simply, yet profoundly sings, "It's not as easy as that... Wrong things, right things – who can say what's true?" (103). The Baker and Cinderella acknowledge that there are two sides to every decision, and no matter which side one takes, he or she is never the only individual who holds that position. Thus, it is important to make decisions regarding right and wrong, but it is

equally as important to remember that all are making similar decisions in similar circumstances: “Someone is on your side... Someone else is not. While we’re seeing our side, maybe we forgot: They are not alone. No one is alone” (104). One must respect others decisions in all circumstances, even when others make mistakes: “People make mistakes. Fathers, mothers... Honor their mistakes. Fight for their mistakes. Everybody makes one another’s terrible mistakes” (103). The plot’s primary theme is manifest in these lines. Distinguishing between right and wrong is difficult, so it is important to always honor others, even when they’re in the wrong; these characters learned from and grew in their trials, and others – even the Steward, in Jack’s case – will too.

One of the most poignant statements from “No One is Alone” reads, “Witches can be right. Giants can be good” (104). The song as a whole acknowledges that the line between right and wrong is blurred, but these lines in particular acknowledge that what is considered bad most likely has some redeeming, good qualities. As mentioned before, the Wolf is the only evil character in the entire story. Upon close analysis, the Witch proves mostly good. Yes, she steals a child, hoards the young girl in a faraway tower, and refuses to allow the girl to experience the outside world. However, the Witch’s motives in all this prove pure, as she only wishes to be loved by one individual and love that individual in return; by keeping Rapunzel to herself and preventing Rapunzel from seeing all the hurt in the world, the hurt which has rejected the Witch, the Witch truly believes that she is doing what is best for her stolen child: “Who out there could love you more than I? What out there that I cannot supply? Stay with me... the world is dark and wild.” (55). Yes, the Witch blinds Rapunzel’s prince, but only in an effort to protect the girl she loves more than anything; the genuine nature of her song “Stay With Me” proves the Witch’s genuine love. Yes, the Witch placed a curse on the Baker’s home and asks him to perform a near impossible feat before lifting it, but she was acting only out of self-preservation, first placing the

curse to gain someone to love her and lifting the curse to regain her beauty, a physical trait which my result in more love. The Witch has experienced a dark world and is seeking the light, the love in it.

Further, the Witch is the only character who keeps her head in crisis. When the Baker, Cinderella, Jack, and Little Red are all placing blame on one another in “Your Fault,” the Witch stops them all with “The Last Midnight,” singing, “If that’s the thing you enjoy, placing the blame, if that’s the aim, give me the blame... You’re not good. You’re not bad. You’re just nice. I’m not good. I’m not nice. I’m just right” (95). The supposedly evil character proves the wisest and the most right. At this point in the storyline, most of those on whom blame could be placed have died; thus, the blame has no consequence, but direct action for the future does. The Witch is the only character to realize this truth. Additionally, her genuine, caring heart is revealed in her motives behind her skewed control over Rapunzel. Yet again, what is bad harbors bits of good.

As is clearly revealed in “No One Is Alone,” Sondheim and Lapine twist each character’s storyline to emphasize the ambiguity between right and wrong, between good and bad, between exciting and scary – all situations are a bit of both! These themes are universal, true, and important in the life of every viewer; therefore, *Into the Woods* proves a brilliant retelling of classic fairytales that highlights important, often overlooked themes. Though brilliant, the story is lacking because it fails both to acknowledge why these distinctions are blurred and to offer a solution to the confusion. In essence, it fails to acknowledge God. Before Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, as recorded in Genesis, Earth did not know evil, so there was no need to understand the division. Even now, when the world is full of both the good and the evil *Into the Woods* acknowledges, navigating the dichotomy between right and wrong isn’t as difficult as the “No One is Alone” suggests – God has given us a manual, of sorts, in the Scriptures! The Baker and Cinderella sing, “You decide what’s right. You decide what’s good. Just remember:

someone is on your side” (104). A Christian worldview cannot align completely with this statement because Jesus himself said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6, *English Standard Version*). Therefore, Jesus himself is truth; He is what is right and good. Through reading his parabolic teaching, we are able to understand who He is and, consequently, what good is. The lyrics hold some truth, for God *is* on our side; we truly are not alone in the struggle between good and evil. However, Christ is the good in this world, and no human decision is the criteria for good. Upon the conclusion of “No One Is Alone,” Jack kills the Giant with a single stone, a moment blatantly reminiscent of David and Goliath, and the quartet returns to the village to reside together in the Baker’s home and live out the newly realized dichotomies together. The audience isn’t as entirely satisfied with this conclusion, for this “happily ever after” isn’t as happy as the first act’s. If the plotline acknowledged a universal, objective truth rather than a subjective, ever changing one, more hope and, thereby, more content would have resulted.

Though *Into the Woods* fails to bring out the complete, Christian truth about the world’s workings, it does raise relevant truths that are important for all to understand: What is *nice* is not necessarily what is *good*. What is *exciting* is often *scary*, too. Most importantly, what is *bad* can often harbor bits of *good*. Through understanding these dichotomies and living them out in community, much personal growth results. Thus, Christians should appreciate Sondheim and Lapine’s work, but they should also take it a step further and recognize that this story only holds meaning because it points to truths taught in God’s grand story for creation, which will yield a complete “happily ever after.”

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