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### On Fairy Tales, Success, and Happiness

When discussing a shift to make nineteenth-century fairy tales “more instructional and moral,” comparative literature scholar Jack Zipes observes “that often, in seeking to protect children, we harm them most” (5). The incorporation of simplified lessons into fairy tales is a likely reason for this unintentional harm. If the uncomplicated morals and plot archetypes devised for children’s unsophisticated interpretive abilities perpetuate into adulthood, they can detrimentally oversimplify reality. In particular, the stock phrase “happily ever after” assumes that victory for the hero or heroine results in lasting happiness. *The Princess Bride*, a novel by William Goldman, challenges this paradigm. Goldman satirizes the expectation that success necessarily brings happiness, as promoted by contemporary Western fairy tales. He does this by means of an inset fairy tale parody, which inverts several of the genre’s major conventions, and by a frame narrative, which explicitly challenges the idea of success effecting happiness in adulthood.

Since an individual’s first exposure to fairy tales is usually during childhood, the inset fairy tale in *The Princess Bride* is a convenient starting point to analyze Goldman’s view of the “happily ever after” paradigm. In disagreement with the genre’s norm, a resolution to the fairy tale’s conflict is provided, yet happiness—even in the short term—is not promised. At the climax of the story, Westley outwits Humperdinck, thereby rescuing Buttercup from a forced marriage to the Prince; and Inigo finally kills Count Rugen, avenging his father. Then Westley, Buttercup,

Inigo, and Fezzik all escape on the “fastest horses in the kingdom,” miraculously provided by a bumbling Fezzik (327). The certainty of their victory is cast into doubt in the final paragraph of the inset fairy tale: “However, this was before Inigo’s wound reopened, and Westley relapsed again, and Fezzik took the wrong turn, and Buttercup’s horse threw a shoe. And the night behind them was filled with the crescendoing sound of pursuit” (327). In his adopted persona of abridging only the “good parts” of S. Morgenstern’s tale, Goldman adds that “[Morgenstern] was a satirist,” calling Morgenstern’s ending “a ‘Lady or the Tiger?’ type effect” (327). Lessening this ambiguity, Goldman also includes some thoughts of his own: “And yes, they got away. . . . But that doesn’t mean I think they had a happy ending either. . . . Buttercup lost her looks eventually, and one day Fezzik lost a fight and some hotshot kid whipped Inigo with a sword and Westley was never able to really sleep sound because of Humperdinck maybe being on the trail” (328). Both author’s ideas subvert the “happily ever after” concept, and Goldman’s particularly emphasizes realistic long-term results instead of lasting perfection.

Such an emphasis likely arises as a response to the perpetuation of unrealistic expectations, as established by fairy tales, to the adult level. Simple morals are appropriate for an audience of children, though the more complex nature of adult life is rarely given much attention, or it is neglected entirely. As a child exposed to fairy tales grows into an adult, his or her ideas of success become less fantastical than those found in fairy tales (such as royalty, true love, and magic), but the presumption of happiness succeeding success is still dominant, and it still denies reality. Jack Zipes admits that fairy tales are essential to promoting happiness: “I believe that fairy tales in all their forms have such profound meaning in our pursuit of happiness,” though Goldman’s focus on reality suggests shortcomings with entrusting too much faith in the simplified success-happiness ideal of fairy tales (x). Literary scholar Max Lüthi

offers an explanation for this apparently exaggerated credence in fairy tales: “The fairy tale portrays, in a wider sense than is generally realized, a harmonious world. The confidence from which it flows is transmitted to both those who tell it and those who hear it. Thus, it is no wonder that not only children come under its spell, but that it repeatedly exerts its charm over adults” (57). The appeal of and desire for a more agreeable world, then, can cause a romanticized image of adult life, where success doesn’t necessarily lead to happiness.

Success at an adult level can be defined in quantitative ways, many of which relate to societal standing and material wealth. Attaining prosperity according to these standards is the embodiment of the American Dream, which presumes that happiness follows the realization of its prescribed success. Journalist Lauren Sandler affirms this conviction: “Over generations of prosperity and growth, the American Dream has become an American Expectation—a version of happiness achieved by entitlement and equation” (73). Sandler characterizes “this dream of arriving at some destination of deep fulfillment” as being “often no more than that: a dream” (77). The simplification that happiness is achievable by meeting tangible standards parallels the fairy tale model of everlasting happiness upon triumphant conflict resolution. Indeed, the American Dream is the modern-day equivalent of a fantastical fairy-tale ending, particularly in the sense that both are realistically unattainable. The perpetuation of unrealistic beliefs about happiness from fairy tales contributes to Landler’s American Expectation. Allowing children to develop unrealistic expectations by reading fairy tales may not adequately prepare them for later in life. The assumption that unabated happiness automatically follows success can lead to disappointment and disillusion.

Goldman’s frame narrative in *The Princess Bride* is an example of such a case, one where success does not result in happiness. His adopted persona borrows successful elements from his

real life: he has a successful career (“Fact: *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* is, no question, the most popular thing I've ever been connected with”), he has a successful wife (“Helen is my wife, the hot-shot child psychiatrist”), and he has a son, Jason (12). In spite of these, however, he confides his dissatisfaction with this life: “All I knew was I was forty years old and I didn't mean to be here when I was forty, locked with this genius shrink wife and this balloon son” (28). An eminent writing career and marriage to a brilliant wife do not guarantee Goldman's happiness; instead, he sounds decidedly unhappy, and is easily tempted by a “gorgeous *and* understanding *and* funny” Californian starlet (18). In giving this unambiguous example of a scenario where happiness doesn't follow marked success (much the opposite, rather, here it leads to disenchantment and bitterness), Goldman questions the validity of the “happily ever after” paradigm as it applies to adult life.

Generally, though, reality lies in between the extremes suggested by Goldman's dystopian frame narrative and the model utopic fairy tale he parodies with S. Morgenstern's tale. Goldman doesn't mean to cynically imply that achieving success is futile because it might lead to disappointment, but he wants to point out the naïveté inherent in the pursuit of flawless happiness. Too much time spent pursuing a dream lifestyle can distract one from the present so strongly that he or she becomes discontent, vainly pursuing a beyond-reach paragon. Desire of a successful lifestyle can be a positive aspiration, though better understanding of the happiness that comes after success should minimize any dismay accompanying the realization that this happiness isn't unequivocal.

To help qualify the nature of this happiness, the fate of S. Morgenstern's heroes bears closer examination. Right before he considers the aforementioned realistic, long-term life of Westley, Buttercup, Inigo, and Fezzik, Goldman answers a few questions surrounding the events

immediately following their escape: “Did they make it? Was the pirate ship there? You can answer it for yourself, but, for me, I say yes it was. And yes, they got away. And got their strength back and had lots of adventures and more than their share of laughs” (328). Again, right after this, Goldman describes the long-term realities for each of these four characters (Buttercup loses her beauty, Fezzik and Inigo are both beaten at their respective strengths, Westley becomes insecure). The happiness that arises after the heroes’ victory, then, is transient, and cannot be assumed to forever remain at the same intensity as that produced by their victory. Although this is neither an appropriately simple moral to teach to children, nor is it an pleasant truth to many adults, Goldman does make it clear that life can’t be expected to be fair when he ends his novel by unsubtly re-iterating the text’s moral: “I’m not trying to make this a downer, understand. . . . But I also have to say, for the umpty-umpth time, that life isn’t fair. It’s just fairer than death, that’s all” (328). Happiness resulting directly from success, especially if great effort has been made to obtain such success, is still subject to practical limitations, such as the effect of time. Acknowledging that this happiness can’t be enduring euphoria is key to avoiding later letdown.

Again, the complex nature of this message makes it inappropriate to instruct to children, but it is possible to better prepare children for grown-up life than by raising them on present-day “wish-fulfillment literature” where “the good people are rewarded and the bad ones punished” (Lüthi 59). Goldman, in his abridger persona, exemplifies a poor father. He stays a week “longer than anticipated in sunny [California]” working on a screenplay, away from his wife and son in New York (23). In part due to Jason’s “[inheriting] his mother’s total lack of humor,” Goldman is quite disinterested in making an active effort to raise him (22). Before leaving the Los Angeles airport, he “[loads] up [his] pockets with doodads and such,” which he later exchanges for a hug from Jason (23). Goldman is unhelpfully critical of his overweight son’s excessive eating habits,

at one point mentioning how his “kid can roll faster than he can walk” (25, 22). Goldman is neither physically nor emotionally present for Jason most of the time as he is more intent on pursuing his successful career, which still doesn’t afford him happiness. In giving this example of a less-than-enthusiastic father, Goldman is advocating that parents really make an effort to spend time with their children and to become actively involved in their children’s upbringing. Though fairy tales were historically designed to teach children morals, raising children exclusively on fairy tales can only be so effective as these morals are simplified for children’s understanding. The intention to teach children morals through fantastical tales that they are capable of relating to with their imaginations is honorable; however, without active parental guidance, children can develop unrealistic expectations—especially relating to success and happiness—from fairy tales that can lead to their discouragement and dissatisfaction later in life.

In satirizing the “happily ever after” paradigm, Goldman exposes the issue of unchecked amplification of the simplified lessons in fairy tales into idealized and unrealistic expectations. Specifically, lasting happiness cannot be guaranteed by success, a fallacy of the American Dream. The happiness thought to result from success is not constant and everlasting, as suggested by fairy-tale endings, but is subject to practical constraints. If parents can actively engage themselves in their children’s upbringing, they can provide instruction beyond that of the simplified values taught in fairy tales and better prepare their children to later handle disappointment.

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