NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

_A Retelling of Classic Tales in a New Light or Just Glares of the Old: An_

An Analysis of "Once Upon a Time" From a Feminist Perspective

A Thesis Submitted to the
University Honors Program
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree
With Upper/Full Division Honors
Department Of
Women's Studies
By
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DeKalb, Illinois
Saturday, May 11th 2013
Capstone Title

*A Retelling of Classic Tales in a New Light or Just Glares of the Old: An Analysis of “Once Upon a Time” From a Feminist Perspective*

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Department of (print or type) ___Women's Studies (WOMS 439)___

Date of Approval (print or type) _______04/25/2013_________
HONORS THESIS ABSTRACT
THESIS SUBMISSION FORM

AUTHOR: Jillian Lilly Schroeder

THESIS TITLE: A Retelling of Classic Tales in a New Light or Just Glares of the Old: An Analysis of “Once Upon a Time” From a Feminist Perspective

ADVISOR: Professor Schewe

ADVISOR’S DEPARTMENT: Women’s Studies and English

DISCIPLINE: Women’s Studies

YEAR: 2013

PAGE LENGTH: 35

BIBLIOGRAPHY: At the end of the paper

ILLUSTRATED: N/A

PUBLISHED (YES OR NO): NO

LIST PUBLICATION: N/A

COPIES AVAILABLE: Hard Copy

ABSTRACT:

This thesis offers a feminist analysis of the ABC television show Once Upon A Time. The show is a modern day fairy tale that retells familiar tales. Through content analysis of season one episodes and promotional material, I have come to the conclusion that Once Upon A Time has rewritten fairy tales that were once extremely sexist and very demeaning towards women. Once Upon A Time is more feminist and portrays women in more powerful and active roles. The women in this show are not just passive, idle princesses but active, strong and independent warriors. However in spite of this advancement for female fairy tale characters the show still highly values feminine beauty, including thinness, youth and whiteness; all characteristics that can cause more damage to women. While this show has made some advancement towards giving women more positive roles, the show still demonstrates that there are still unrealistic ideals for females in society to fulfill.
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Abstract

This thesis offers a feminist analysis of the ABC television show *Once Upon A Time*. The show is a modern day fairy tale that retells familiar tales. Through content analysis of season one episodes and promotional material, I have come to the conclusion that *Once Upon A Time* has rewritten fairy tales that were once extremely sexist and very demeaning towards women. *Once Upon A Time* is more feminist and portrays women in more powerful and active roles. The women in this show are not just passive, idle princesses but active, strong and independent warriors. However in spite of this advancement for female fairy tale characters the show still highly values feminine beauty, including thinness, youth and whiteness; all characteristics that can cause more damage to women. While this show has made some advancement towards giving women more positive roles, the show still demonstrates that there are still unrealistic ideals for females in society to fulfill.
From a very young age, children are now shown their fairy tales through the form of films. Fairy tales convey messages about individual behavior and what society defines as success. Fairy tales can be positive. They demonstrate positive morals that are instilled in children at young ages and carried through adulthood. Conversely, negative aspects are also carried through adulthood. Fairy tales are a reflection of our society and what society values. One of the main values shown is assigned gender roles and what men and women should be in order to be successful members of society. These messages are limiting to members of both sexes and often more negative towards females.

There are extremely sexist messages perceived by viewers, particularly children and this creates a negative effect on all audience members. Fairy tale audiences witness women in positions of less power than men. Women are commonly in submissive roles and depend on a man (Zipes 3). This can be in more ways than one. Some female fairy tale characters cannot even live without a man and depend on them for life. Women fairy tale characters are usually shown, if they are active, following a man and being obedient to the men in their lives (Dawn 556). This can be morally or physically following a man; a woman usually follows a man’s choices and decisions or literally follows him from location to location. Women in fairy tales do not usually think for themselves and seek out the dominant men in their lives for guidance (Zipes 5). The features focused on the most are women’s looks and appearances (Dawn 556). In my own observations of animated fairy tale retellings, the female characters are attractive and their looks become the main focus, even if they are intelligent. Even if the fairy tale is in a book (which is a non-visual form of medium) and in a book of some type a female fairy tale character’s looks are always emphasized no matter what the story line (Baker-Sperry, Grauerholz 711).
Male fairy tale characters fulfill very different attributes and roles compared to female fairy tale characters. Male characters are typically very strong and are leading the way (Zipes 3). They are heroic and do not rely on anyone, in addition to being independent and they may have followers (Zipes 4). Depictions of male fairy tale characters, both in visual and non-visual formats, do not focus on their physical attributes (Dawn 161). This contrasts with female fairy tale characters. This difference is continually shown to children and influences them in major ways. One of these major ways was in gender role development. These fairy tale shows and stories teach children how they should act based on the gender that is assigned to them (Dawn 557). Only recently have some of the fairy tales that are being published and shown starting to change some of these sexist gender roles that are being shown to viewers (Kuykendal & Strum 40). However, the sexist messages are still being seen in fairy tales despite some small advancements that make female fairy tale characters more empowered.

These sexist messages shown to fairy tale viewers create a large problem and are evident within all forms of fairy tale retellings (Zipes 1). Fairy tale animated films are very popular for young children to watch and if they are watching them on a subconscious level these sexist messages are being absorbed and eventually applied (Dawn 557). It cannot be denied that these messages are in fairy tale retellings, especially in visual ones. Jack Zipes, in Don’t Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England, argues that there is a need for new fairy tales development due to the extremely sexist nature of those currently in circulation. He also agrees that fairy tales dominate our society and highly influence children (Zipes 32). They are easily remembered and acted out; children want to be these characters are thus socialized about these values, habits and morals (Zipes 2). By keeping to strict gender roles
consistently in fairy tales those who continue to pass on the tales, whether aware or unaware, are passing along sexist messages to participants.

After my own observations of fairy tales in both books and movies I had little hope that there would ever be a main stream product that would be non-sexist and be feminist friendly. Then one day while I was relaxing and watching television there was a preview for a new ABC series all about modern day fairy tales. It was *Once Upon A Time*. The series is about a town called Storybrooke where all the fairy tale characters ever known have been cursed and sent from the enchanted forest to live in our modern day world. All their happy endings are stolen by the Evil Queen who did not want anyone happy but herself. The hero of the show is actually a heroine, Emma. She was the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming and was destined to save the entire town from the curse. All of the females in the show were attractive but extremely active. For example, Snow White had a sword in hand and was fighting a man. Not only were the female characters central and active in this show but a majority of the characters were female. This caused me to think that this show might encourage Zipe’s ideals for feminist fairy tales. It seemed to be a show that reversed the traditional fairy tale gender norms. I was immediately intrigued and after watching the previews so many times and seeing advertisements in other sources I believed this show would be the feminist friendly fairy tale retelling I had been searching for.
Another reason I thought that this show was going to be more feminist friendly and ultimately give women a more powerful and active role that I had not seen before in fairy tales was because of the magazine advertisements I had seen. Both of the images that I commonly saw for the television show are above. Image one was more widespread and I saw it in multiple places. The woman in the picture is of the main heroine, Emma. She has a powerful stance that is not traditionally feminine, and she is holding a sword. In all of the fairy tale images that I ever encountered, both as a child and as an adult, the female characters never held objects of battle such as a sword. Swords, shields, and knives were specifically male objects and men used them to fight with other men. The sword is placed downward which might suggest she is not being active, but she seems to be facing whatever is coming through the smoke and to be ready to take on whatever is going to come through. This demonstrates that she is courageous and powerful. Once again this is not the type of action or characteristics I had previously seen coming from a female fairy tale character.

Image two shows both Emma and Snow White. Snow White is the mother of Emma and, as viewers see throughout the show, an extremely harsh force to be reckoned with. Without having seen the show and knowing the characters, this image still shows both unity and power. Both women are taking a stance that is firm and seems unmovable. These stances show power and that if someone were to confront either of these women they would not go down without a fight. Unlike most female fairy tale characters, both of them are wearing some kind of pants or a flexible leg clothing item and a jacket of some type. Most female fairy tale characters wear dresses, which are very stiff and impracticable for being a heroine. The classic animated fairy tale of Snow White that was made in 1937 only showed the character Snow White in a dress. Snow White from Once Upon A Time would never have been doing all the life saving and forest
living she did if she were in a dress. Overall both of these advertisements helped convince me that *Once Upon A Time* would give female fairy tale characters different gender roles than other fairy tale telling had.

The final element that made me believe this show would be more feminist friendly and give women a more active and powerful place in fairy tales was the wording used in the first thirty seconds of the pilot episode. The episode starts off with stating the title of the show, "*Once Upon A Time." Then it goes on to say in white print on a black background, "There was an enchanted forest filled with all the classic characters we know." About three seconds later "Or think we know," flashes across the bottom and the introduction of the show continues on. Immediately, the show was establishing that this show was going to be different and that these characters that we think we know are really not the beloved characters we believe them to be. I interpreted this in relation to gender roles. After all my observations of the advertisements in magazines and television commercials I thought this show was going to show us fairy tale characters in diverse gender roles and breaking what we typically thought female and male fairy tale characters were supposed to be and do.

In regards the term feminist, I would like to define the term because I may have a different definition than other feminists. In terms of this paper when I speak of ‘feminist friendly’ or ‘feminist’ culture/beliefs I am referring primarily to third-wave feminist beliefs. I myself am a third-wave feminist. This means I believe feminism encompasses and accepts everyone, regardless of race, sex, sexuality, gender, age, ability, etc. I believe in advocating for any minority. I also think an important concept to discuss is intersectionality. Intersectionality means that there is not just one defining aspect of an individual, but that there are many and all of these characteristics of an individual overlap and play off of each other to create our life.
experiences. This applies to any individual and means that no single aspect of a person can accurately reflect on their history or their background. For instance being a woman is not my only defining characteristic, but my views on life and my life experiences are also shaped by me being a white, middle-class, twenty-two year old, heterosexual woman. In this paper I consider race, age and gender to intersectional factors that are important in determining how *Once Upon A Time* portrays woman characters.

Privilege is another term that is significant in this paper. Privilege means that due to certain aspects of an individual’s intersectional identity they have privileges and advantages throughout life that they can be aware or unaware of. This can be seen in many aspects of the show. An example of some areas where individuals can gain privilege is in gender roles. Most men are unaware of the privilege they have just by being men. This can affect them all throughout life. This even affects their gender roles and the roles they are allowed to fulfill in our society, including the roles they see portrayed in many fairy tales. Men often have more respected and more powerful positions in society because of their gender roles. On the opposite end of the spectrum women have less powerful gender roles and generally much less is expected of women.

*Once Upon A Time* is a television show that is feminist friendly in a sense that it gives female fairy tale characters more power, strength and active roles. However, the show still perpetuates some negative stereotypes. While women are given more powerful roles, the characters still conform to feminine beauty ideals, heterosexual expectations, and the ideals of youth and whiteness. The show encourages viewers to question women’s roles in society, careers and the power that they can hold, and how important family and partnerships are for women. However, a critical feminist analysis must also question those assumptions that remain
unchallenged in the show, such as how important beauty is for both “good” and “bad” characters and how much we as a society value youth and light skin color. *Once Upon A Time*, although it is not completely positive, at least is bending gender role norms for female fairy tale characters and is asking the audience to critically question the fairy tale characters we usually see. There is however, room for improvement if they really wanted offer a fully feminist alternative. At the very least the show does make viewers second guess how they originally perceived fairy tales.

**In a New Light: Women in Powerful Roles**

*Once Upon A Time* incorporates the Grimm Brother’s fairy tales, modern day fairy tales and mythology and places it all in a modern day retelling. This is a show about story book characters that have a curse placed on them by the Evil Queen/Regina. All the characters were taken from their fairly tale realm and brought to a town in modern day Maine, Storybrooke. No one but the Evil Queen has any idea who they really are. There is a young boy there, Henry who is the son adoptive son of the Evil Queen/Regina. He one day reads a fairy tale book and begins to place the pieces together and seeks out his birth mother, Emma, who is destined to be the town’s savior who frees them from the curse. Emma is the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming, but of course no one knows this and no one believes Henry because he is just a twelve year old boy. Emma eventually moves into town and becomes sheriff. The entire first season flashes back and forth between Storybrooke and the other realm where magic and fairy tales exist. By the end of the first season it is proven that the town is under a curse and Emma does save the day. Emma grows a lot throughout the show as a woman, mother and a heroine.
Upon watching the first episode of the series I grew concerned that this show would not be testing gender roles as I had predicted it would. It started with a typical retelling of the classic Snow White tale. Snow White was in waiting in her glass coffin for Prince Charming to awaken her with a kiss, the seven dwarves surrounding her in the middle of the forest. Sure enough Prince Charming came on horseback to the rescue and saved the princess (Once Upon A Time Episode 1). Snow White was lying in her coffin, submissive, as most female fairy tale characters are, waiting for her price to actively appear and save the day. Prince Charming was riding up on his horse, strong and in control on the situation and ready to take charge and save Snow White. This is not uncommon for traditional, patriarchal fairy tales (Parsons 137). I continued to watch the show because other female characters and their roles gave me hope that the show would challenge women’s submissive role. This scene and story seemed to be reenacted to entice viewers and reassure them that the fairy tales would not stray too far from the familiar stories that most viewers had grown up with. These fairy tales do stray from the traditional ones, but the producers want the audience to be reassured it will not be too drastic and uncomfortable. It is as if too much change is uncomfortable.

Rather than showing Snow White as passive and waiting on her prince for the entire season they show her as active and powerful after the first scene of the first episode. It would seem the producers wanted to make the show different and show a different Snow White but they had to ease into so they did not scare the viewers away. As viewers warmed up to the idea of Snow White not being the same character they once knew her to be the producers seemed to take more risks with her character and made her more masculine. Her clothing became more masculine, more flexible and easy to move and fight in. She became more independent and required no man to care or fend for in the forest. By the end of season one, she truly became one

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of the most powerful female fairy tale characters in this show. There are multiple scenes in the fairy tale realm where we can see Snow White fighting against soldiers and other people, even her own future husband, in the forest where she depends on no one else (*Once Upon A Time* Episode 3 3:01). Snow White is given new more powerful and more typically male associated masculine characteristics in this show.

Later in season one, we see Snow White taking a much more active role, disrupting the traditional gender roles of fairy tales. As the show developed more it became more and more clear that this was not the same Snow White that was in the classic animated Disney version that most viewers knew. She is essentially forced out of the kingdom by the Evil Queen, her step mother. When this happens Snow White is changed drastically. She is no longer wearing the very feminine clothes that princesses wear and she is dressed in more mobile clothing. The clothing is in colors that blend with the forest and make her less visible to hunters and to game she may later kill and eat. She becomes a masculine hunter living off the land. She is always seen with a bow and arrow and can shoot anything. She develops into a strong, independent and brave woman. She leaves behind her princess persona of passivity and manners. She even successfully rescues Prince Charming in a very unfeminine and brave manner (*Once Upon A Time* Episode 21 30:36). A female being the heroine shown actively saving another characters goes against the common stereotype of women being weak (Wolf 59). Snow White and Prince Charming go back and forth throughout the season figuring out their love in the modern world and rescuing each other from sticky situations, portraying a more equal relationship.

Snow White was just one of the many obviously powerful characters on the show; a majority of the powerful characters were female. While watching *Once Upon A Time* it is hard not to notice the powerful women all throughout the show both in Storybrooke and the fairy tale
realm. Women seem to run the entire town of Storybrooke; men have more leadership roles in the fairy tale realm. This is one of the most significant differences that this show has with other modern television/movie adaptations of fairy tales. Typically the female characters that are seen in fairy tales are not in powerful positions, other than perhaps that of princess, which does not seem to require much other than finding a husband (Parsons 137). The women in the modern day realm of Storybrooke have jobs like major and sheriff and other jobs that keep them active in society. But the first two jobs listed are two of the highest jobs in a town and very rarely held by female characters in media presentations. In this show the women are not dependant on men for their social standing and they all have high standing in the modern world. The women in this television show are the opposite of the typical female fairy tale character; they are strong, independent and daring.

The Evil Queen or Regina, as she is known in the modern world, is the mayor of Storybrooke. In the fairy tale realm she is the Evil Queen (the title sort of describes itself). She is in a very powerful position and does not have good intentions. Her main goal in the fairy tale world is to ruin every fairy tale character’s happy ending. In the modern world as mayor Regina has a lot of power which she chooses to assert over others and use a lot for her own personal gains. Being mayor is a very powerful position and usually a position a society associates with a man. By having a female character taking on this position the show is showing viewers a positive message, showing that women can hold these positions and that women are strong enough to hold these position.

There are many scenes in the show that demonstrate Regina’s power but one in particular that stands out is in the middle of the first season during an interaction she has with Emma (Once Upon A Time Episode 10 14:08). Emma is the sheriff in Storybrooke and at this point in the
show has no real tie to the fairy tale realm that can be proven. In the scene Regina stretches her powers as mayor to have the sheriff look into a newcomer to town. The newcomer has posed no threat other than having talked to Regina’s son. There is no cause for alarm, yet because of her power and position in town she is able to approach the sheriff about the matter and get the sheriff to look into the matter. Most citizens who might have called the police over such a mild matter would have been criticized for wasting the authorities’ time. This could be seen as an abuse of power, therefore undermining the show’s challenge to feminine stereotypes portraying women in power very negatively. In this situation the mayor is female but it could appear that she is abusing her power needlessly and this is just another reason why women should not hold high positions like this in society. However, Regina’s abuse of power has to be understood alongside Emma’s responsible use of power if we are to understand the full range of women in positions of power.

Emma, as another high authority figure in Storybrooke, uses her power with control and positive intent. She never abuses her power and seems to be the voice of reason to any irrational requests. Emma Swan is the sheriff of Storybrooke. Emma is a female character who potentially has a fairy tale character role as the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming. She, as well of the rest of Storybrooke, is unaware of this. Emma is drawn to the town by her biological son who is the adopted son of Regina. When the original sheriff dies, after falling in love with Emma (almost any man that does fall in love with her has an untimely death) Emma wins the election for sheriff. Sheriff is another male-associated role and a very powerful role. She immediately steps into the role confidently and gets right to work. She is a hard worker and is always on the clock. The residents of Storybrooke can count on her for anything and everything. She is independent, strong and masculine in many senses. She dresses in more masculine attire and

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carries herself very assertively, which is usually associated with masculinity and men. It appears that these two women, in more ways than one, are bending typical gender roles for females and not just in fairy tale roles.

In addition to Once Upon A Time showing women in powerful positions, the show also shows women living their daily lives independently of men, which can present a challenge to the usually fairy tale romance plot. Regina adopted Henry as a single mother. She did not have any known love interest at the time and just wanted a son of her own. She also did not believe that she needed a father for her son and she was strong enough to parent without a man in her life. Towards the end of the season Emma has every intention of legally obtaining custody of Henry and by the end of the season Henry is living with Emma by choice with her as a single mother. Several minor characters are also single mothers as well. Rarely, if ever, has Disney had single mothers raising their own children or giving their children up for adoption. This is a huge change for the typical fairy tale and has never been shown before. It is a positive change because in our current society there are so many single mothers and adoption is a very common way of obtaining children. By showing these ideas in main stream fairy tales it is making the concepts more familiar and eventually more accepted by society, which will eventually lead to less negative social stigma.

They are not the only characters in the show to be single mothers. Cinderella/Ashley also gets pregnant in the modern day world and decides she is going to have the child and originally has every intention of doing so without her boyfriend. After the birth the father of the child, who was held back by his conservative father, comes around and wants to raise the child with Cinderella/Ashley. They eventually get married but she originally plans on having her child on her own and without the father.
This is extremely interesting concept being given to the audience. Never has fairy tale stories really shown mothers out of wed lock, having and raising children without some kind of man around. The show is definitely pushing the boundaries on what is fairy tale appropriate. This has something to do with our changing cultures and changing ideals for women. I believe due to our changing society and what is acceptable for motherhood that this being in this prime time television show is appropriate. Because of some popular media and our changing culture these stories of single mothers and young motherhood are acceptable. We are seeing young mother all throughout the media on shows like *Teen Mom* and *16 And Pregnant*. These shows reach out to a number of viewers. By *Once Upon A Time* including motherhood like this they are intriguing younger generations and gaining a wider variety of viewers. It also makes viewers feel that is it more acceptable to have children out of wed lock and at a young age. It makes an individual who fits in that demographic not such a social reject, but accepted and appreciated somewhere.

While on the topic of motherhood, women and being powerful, motherhood brings an interesting dynamic to a powerful woman. Does being a mother make a woman more or less powerful? In the context of this show it appears that a woman is more empowered by being a mother. Emma seems to be more strong and courageous because of her love for her son. Regina also seems more protective and fierce because of the love of her son. But, typically in our society this is seen as a setback in a woman’s life. Having a child is seen as a burden and something that ties a woman to her home and takes away her mobility both literally and figuratively. In this show the women who are most powerful, the Evil Queen, Snow White and Emma are all mothers. I would argue that being a mother in this show, both biological and adoptive, gives you another form of power and love that allows you to do more than other non-mothers. This is similar to what is seen with enlightened sexism. It is as though it appears we as a society have

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made all these advancements towards women and women have gained equal footing with men but there is still that underlying notion of sexism at work (Douglas 5). Women have gained some privileges when it comes to motherhood, which motherhood used to be seen as more of a burden and a negative thing to women. This show however almost fantasizes it too much and does not show all the difficult times. There is financial stability to think of and emotional to think of when it comes to raising a child. All of these things come into play when it comes to children.

In addition, motherhood of the many tools *Once Upon A Time* uses to establish that the character is heterosexual, contributing to the heteronormative bias of the show. For every character there is a scene that defines their sexuality as heterosexual. There may have been some questions about a character’s sexuality, but the writers of the show are quick to reassure the viewers that almost all the characters, especially the main characters, are straight. For instance in the first seven or so episodes of the season there could have been some doubt about the Evil Queen’s sexuality. She has not been shown in a sexual or loving relationship yet and she adopted a son, which implies she lacked a partner to have child with. However, the seventh episode resolves all doubt by giving a very sexualized look at the Evil Queen. She is disappointed with the Huntsman/Town Sheriff who fails to kill Snow White in the fairy tale realm. As punishment she rips his heart from his chest after a very steamy kiss. By taking his heart she controls him and says “You are now mine, my pet.” She then reinforces that if he tries to leave her all she has to do is squeeze his heart, which she will from then on keep caged up in a box, and he will die. After this encounter the Evil Queen immediately tells her soldiers “Take him to my bed chamber”, (*Once Upon A Time* Episode 7 38:28) and we see the Huntsman being carried off to her chamber.

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This scene seems very unusual in a fairy tale setting. I was initially so shocked by how highly sexual this episode was that I did not question why it was so highly sexual. When I looked back the previous six episodes I realized that the Evil Queen or Regina really had no sexuality thus far in the show. There had been some kind of assumption that she was straight because she is the step mother to Snow White but little to none of these scenes had been shown yet and non were sexual. I think the writers were worried the audience might begin to question and therefore become uncomfortable with the character if her sexuality were not addressed. Almost all fairy tales, especially the ones shown to children involve heterosexual characters, and this show follows that rule as well. In spite of recent progress in gay rights, *Once Upon A Time* reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is normal and natural, promoting heteronormativity.

Being heterosexual is so important on this show that the producers even go to great lengths to make characters such as nuns, who are essentially asexual, heterosexual if they were allowed to be. This apparent distraction from the main plot of the show reinforces the importance of heterosexuality. In the fairy tale world a dwarf, originally named Dreamy who eventually becomes Grumpy, falls in love with a fairy named Nova. They meet by chance and fall in love and want to run off together, but before their journey can begin it is quickly established that dwarves to not love and fairies are not supposed to, they have other responsibilities. Even though it is established early on there is still a story link between the two and they develop feelings for each other that eventually are stopped (*Once Upon A Time* Episode 14). I believe this was put in the show just to establish that heterosexuality is there, even when the characters are supposed to be asexual. Both of these species in the fairy tale realm are essentially non-sexual and yet they manage to fall in the love with opposite gendered individuals. In the modern world the fairy Nova is a nun, but still seems to have a bit of a flirty relationship with Dreamy/Grumpy/Leroy.
who is a modern day miner. Nuns are essentially committed to God and not supposed to be sexual in any way yet the show has her in this mini relationship just to establish her heterosexuality.

The women in this show break the typical gender roles in fairy tales because the women by are the most powerful figures around. The show ultimately changes and challenges the way fairy tales portray female roles. By giving these women high-powered careers and powerful roles, the show offers to female viewers more self-esteem and higher life aspirations. The show not only shows women in the modern world holding real life jobs that are powerful, but it also shows the princesses in more active roles, such as Snow White fighting her own battles.

It could be argued that traditional fairy tales and their retellings are based around princesses, giving women a central role. However, these women have always been shown as submissive and very much under the thumb of a man (Zipes 14). This show gives princesses and other female fairy tale characters new characteristics and helps to put them on a level playing field with male characters in fairy tales. This is an extremely positive aspect of this show that I, as well as other feminist viewers, could not be more ecstatic to see. There are, however, some limits to the advancements the show has made towards empowering female fairy tale characters.

Just a Glare of the Old: Stereotypical Notions of Beauty and Whiteness

*Once Upon A Time* shows women in strong, confident and active roles that challenge stereotypical notions of women as passive and weak. The show did, however, conform to negative social expectations in other ways. The show is filled with beautiful women, and they are in nearly every role no matter what the character's status as good or evil, poor or rich. No woman

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in the show falls outside of this rule. In traditional fairy tales, there used to be space for unattractive women, at least as evil characters; now they really have nowhere to go, unattractive women are absent from the show entirely (Kuykendal and Strum 39). This development, all the women in the show being beautiful, may be seen as a positive thing because ugliness is no longer associated with evil, but overall it creates even more isolation for women who do not fit very narrow definitions of female beauty, who do not see any reflection of themselves in the show. It leaves no space for them to be seen in the show and leaves audience members only viewing stereotypically beautiful actresses who present a very narrow range of what is considered beautiful for women.

With the obvious facial beauty of these women comes some other culturally attractive attributes. One of the most common and most discussed in feminist scholarship that applies to this show is the importance of thinness. All of the women of this show, minus a couple exceptions, are not above a size five. From the pictures and television show it is clear that all of these women are of average height, 5’2” – 5’ 7” and are much below an average clothing size, which is usually between a size 8-14 (Zernike 1). This can be seen in the show’s publicity photos and still shots of the show, such as image three and four. This conforms with the social standards that women in the media needs to be certain sizes in order to be appealing. Unfortunately for a majority of women these ideals are unrealistic and not met. This leaves women feeling inadequate and can lead to harmful disorders and low self-esteem in women (Edut 5). These standards of being thin along with beautiful are continually shown throughout this show. These unachievable standards are harmful to women and can cause women to feel inadequate because they cannot meet these high beauty and thinness demands (Edut 188).
As you can tell from these images all of the women in the pictures are gorgeous. In image three (from left to right) the viewer sees the actress who plays Belle, Snow White/Mary Margaret, Evil Queen/Regina and Emma. All four of these women exceed the standards of beauty and meet the ideals for body type. All four of the women are obviously thin and appear to be curvy and attractive in all the right places. The ideal of feminine beauty means that an individual has an attractive face with pleasing, proportion facial features. Luscious lips are always appreciated, tamed eyebrows and long eyelashes. Natural appearing beauty seems to also be a plus, a little bit of makeup but not too much. Being thin is also ideal. The waist needs to be small with having slightly wider hips and a curvy behind, not too curvy, and curvy chest is an ideal body. No cellulite is allowed, and your belly should be flat, no fat should be built up there. Belle and Snow White play princesses on the show and it is safe to say they are pretty much real life versions of the Disney animated princesses.

This is part of the modern day beauty myth and it is fictional and usually unobtainable for the average woman (Wolf 4). Viewers of these images of beautiful women internalize this unobtainable ideal and struggle on many levels with their own bodies. A large percent of the population will never reach these high beauty ideals of thinness and they punish themselves. For some this can result in eating disorders or other complications. For others this can lead to individuals trying to perfect themselves on a character level because they believe having an imperfect body is a reflection of having imperfect self (Gimlin 5). These comparisons can lead to damaged self-esteem and physical damages to women of all ages.

The fourth image (from left to right) shows Snow White/Mary Margaret, Cinderella/Ashley and Red Ridinghood/Ruby. All are well-known fairy tale characters. Cinderella and Red Ridinghood are new to this analysis. Both are not central characters in this
television show, but even as minor characters, they still fulfill the very narrow ideals of beauty and thinness. Having even the supporting actresses meet these ideals even further emphasizes how important beauty and thinness are to this show and how crucial it is to the show's producers that they show only beautiful, thin women. Both women are extremely pretty and they are somewhat sexualized and appear to be relaxed and flirty. All the women that have been mentioned do have different characteristics that do make them beautiful, none of them are from an exact mold. All of them are different heights, have different hair colors and varying curves. However, all of these women are between the age of 18 to 35, beautiful, thin and white. This image is just further proof of how the female characters on the show are all beautiful, no matter how significant or insignificant their role, and how they meet the standards of beauty and thinness that society holds dear.

The show seems to want beauty so much that even evil characters conform to beauty ideals, which is a departure from traditional fairy tales. Being an evil character in fairy tales is usually evident by a character's attractiveness. Evil characters, particularly female ones, are traditionally dark, ugly and possibly fat (Kuykendal and Strum 39). When young readers or viewers indulge in fairy tales and receive these messages that evil characters are fat or ugly they subliminally learn that if you are heavier or not exactly the most beautiful, you must be evil. A majority of the population does not meet these high beauty standards which leaves a lot of women outside of them. With these messages of evil women being fat and ugly, it is only to be expected that larger and less conventionally pretty girls think they are not good, which could lead to negative behavior or overall low self-esteem. This show in a sense defies these notions of all evil characters being ugly and/or fat, which can be a positive thing for viewers of the show. The main evil character on the show, the Evil Queen/Regina is not fat nor is she ugly. In fact she is
very pretty, gorgeous as most would say (image three, third from the left). If anyone saw this actress as just an everyday woman I am sure she would get many looks, she is beautiful and her looks could take your breath away. She has a very pretty face, full lips, and a curvy, slender body. Women in classic fairy tales usually do not have a lot of power unless they are ugly, and generally that also means they are also evil (Kuykendal and Strum 39). In this television show even evil characters are not ugly, which could be seen to support the idea that women can, and perhaps should, be powerful without losing their femininity. However, as mentioned above, this leaves no room in the show for any women actresses who do not meet the beauty standards.

Age is another extremely important factor when it comes to beauty ideals. All of the women on the show are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. There is a storyline for the show to explain why this is but I think there are other reasons for keeping the characters in this age range. I believe the producers of the show wanted all the characters to be in an age range that most viewers could relate with and vicariously live through. I believe this is because the producers wanted to attract viewers in this age range, but also because this is an idealized age range for viewers who are older or younger. Our society seems to emphasize on those years as being the best years of an individual’s life. Being older than thirty-five is too old and everything is downhill from there and being younger than eighteen is too young and you have no freedom. Being in that age range is seen as the ideal amount of freedom and youth. Having characters between the appealing ages of eighteen and thirty-five intrigues a majority of adult audiences, as well as some younger ones. It also adds an interesting dynamic to the relationship with Snow White and her daughter Emma, which due to the time pausing they are only about five years apart and essentially peers. Other than storyline and audience appeal reasons, there are deeper societal reasons for why these ages are appealing to audience members.
Like the beauty and thinness ideals, there are social reasons why youth is appealing. For a majority of people age is related with beauty. Being young and beautiful seems to go hand in hand (Wolf 56). One cannot be old and beautiful; the two just do not seem to mix in society’s eyes. You can see this all throughout the media, with constant advertisement for anti-aging treatments and other ways to make older women look younger and more appealing to men. There are also many celebrities who have surgery to make them look younger. It is impossible to deny that age is not an important factor in beauty and being appealing to the opposite sex or same sex, whichever an individual is trying to attract.

The show’s producers did not promote the standard of evil characters being ugly, but they did continue the trend of evil characters being in dark clothing and environments. Whether she is in the modern world acting as mayor and adoptive mother of Emma’s son Henry or in the fairy tale realm riding carriages and making deals with kings, the Evil Queen/Regina is always in dark clothing. This darkness that surrounds the Evil Queen/Regina is a tool that has been long used in fairy tales to help make evil characters stand out. Darkness is associated with negativity and bad things (Kuykendal and Strum 39). Darkness can also be applied to race and therefore being African American can be seen as an evil and bad quality to have.

In addition to associating dark colors with evil through Regina’s wardrobe, *Once Upon a Time* is conspicuously lacking in racial diversity. After watching just a few episodes it becomes apparent that there are no characters that are not Caucasian. Throughout the first season, there is only one consistent African American character and one other temporary character. It seems that the creators of the show wanted the town to be mostly Caucasian. There are a few theories I can come up with to why this is. The producers may have just been so focused in showing what they think the audience wants to see and what the audience will identify with. There is one author Schroeder 25
who believes that this is just due to a steady decline in the media and their showing of African Americans in the media. He says this has happened with other shows because it is unfamiliar to the viewers and not necessarily and a desirable position in life (Entman and Rojecki 53). In making the show entirely Caucasian, the producers of Once Upon a Time are preventing huge numbers of the American population from identifying with this show. As a Caucasian woman I am able to find characters in this show and identify with them and have an almost cathartic release in watching the show. I believe that for viewers who do not have characters that they can racially identify with they may not get as much of a cathartic release. This personally affects my selections of what televisions shows I watch. I want to be able to relate to what I am watching; I am sure others are the same.

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affects my selections of what televisions shows I watch. I want to be able to relate to what I am watching; I am sure others are the same.

There is one character, the Genie/Sidney, who is African American and demonstrates the problematic racial issues that the show has when it does show non-Caucasian actors. In the fairy tale realm he is the Genie. He is enslaved to the magic bottle he must remain in and he must serve those that rub the bottle. He is found by the King, Snow White’s father, who wishes he be released from his restraints as Genie. He then goes to the Kingdom with the King and meets Snow White and the Evil Queen. The Genie immediately falls in love with the Evil Queen and he becomes a victim to love and will do anything for her. The Evil Queen eventually reveals to the Genie that she never really loved him but was using him become more powerful and allow her to rule the kingdom. In a fit of despair the Genie uses his last wish left over from the King to wish to always be with the Evil Queen. This of course, like all the wishes granted by the genie bottle, back fires and he becomes the face in the mirror that worships the Evil Queen. In the modern day realm the Genie is Sidney, who is a journalist for the local paper and essentially Regina/Evil Queen’s loyal servant. He does everything he can for her including all of her dirty work that at times can incriminate him. The producers of the show essentially made the only black character on the show into a modern day slave. It is a poor reflection on the producers that they apparently failed to notice that this might be problematic.

He does everything he can for her including all of her dirty work that at times can incriminate him. The producers of the show are almost caught so far in the past that they cannot see how truly racist and living centuries ago that they are being. They essentially made the only black character on the show into a modern day slave. It is a poor reflection on the producers. For African American viewers of the show this is reveling to them that black fairy tale character are
only good as slaves or servants of more powerful white characters. By making Genie/Sidney as submissive and enslaved as he is they are saying that he is not worthy of power and therefore not good enough to be more than a slave. This could submissively have negative effects on black viewers, if at this point there are any black viewers.

The only African American character on the show essentially turns into a slave. He barely is given any freedom or voice of his own. In the modern world there was a character who went missing and was presumed to be dead. Snow White/Mary Margaret was being framed but her friends and Emma knew it was actually the Evil Queen/Regina who was setting her up. The missing character came back to the show and questions of her disappearance were arising. Due to lack of evidence from the victim Snow White/Mary Margaret was proven innocent. To get attention away from her the Evil Queen/Regina arranged for her personal slave Genie/Sidney to take the fall for the kidnapping. In the scene where he confesses he is not even in the room to begin with. The conversation is initially between the Evil Queen/Regina and Emma who is the sheriff. Genie/Sidney comes into the room and confesses while looking at the Evil Queen/Regina the entire time. She probes him to make sure he is telling the entire truth and is almost like a parent with a child making she he fully apologizes (Once Upon A Time Episode 19 40:09). This scene clearly shows the dynamic of their relationship and the control the Evil Queen/Regina really has over Genie/Sidney and how little control over himself he seems to have.

The problematic racial politics of Once Upon a Time are similar to other modern fairy tale retellings, especially those from Disney. Disney actually owns many different networks, ABC is one of them, ABC produces Once Upon A Time. Most Americanized versions of fairy tales rarely have women of color in them, let alone in leading roles. Only recently has Disney released an animated story tale with an African American main character and princess, this was

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in 2009 in the movie The Princess and The Frog. The fact that it took Disney nearly a hundred years to release a princess that was black is a little shocking. There is some debate that this is because the princesses need to be appealing to men and they only can be if one they are rich, such as a princess and two if they are white (Bell 232). This is evolving over time and is changing but particularly when Disney first started making their animations this was very true. On the other hand Disney has also released princesses that are Asian, Mulan, and princesses who are Arab, Jasmin in Aladin.

There was another African American character that was shown on the show, also in a slave like role, and who was given less than a minute of air time on the show. This length of time just shows the insignificance that her role played, which I think in part had to do with her race. In many fairy tales there are essential magical fairy tale species, fairy god mothers. Cinderella, whose royal life would not have been possible without one, had a fairy god mother whose life was short lived in this TV show. She was African American, and in a sense she was a slave to whom ever needed her power. She was very powerful but her power was limited to only help those in need and in this situation it was a white girl. This African American god mother was powerful and could use it as she pleased, but she was obligated to use it for a white woman and had to use it for Cinderella’s benefit only. She was literally on the screen for thirty-four seconds. She was African American and sent to help Cinderella get to the ball, but she was killed by the Dark One/Rumplstillskin, who is all about making deals and using dark magic (Once Upon A Time Episode 4 1:11-1:45).

A question that arises is why did the creators and others involved in creating this show keep to a certain age range and racial demographic? Is it because they thought the audience only wanted to see those that fit their standards? And if it is what kind of reflection is this of our
society? Maybe this was done because they assumed most of their viewers would be Caucasian and would want to identify with the characters in the show. This appears to be another ideal that society wants characters in this television show, and other forms of entertainment, to fulfill. According to some research as stated above it seems that being African American is just not desired in our society, and with that being said it seems obvious that television viewers would not want them in the show that the indulge in and live vicariously through (Entman and Rojecki 53). It could possibly be even considered a beauty ideal and having light skin could be a requirement for beauty. The two African American characters that are on this show are indeed black but both are of a lighter shade of black. It seems to be on this television show one must be Caucasian, with very few exceptions and if an individual is going to be that exception they must be of a light skin shade.

Fairy Tales Told in a New Light With a Glare from Traditional Fairy Tale Retellings

*Once Upon A Time* is overall a show that makes very positive gender role advancements for female fairy tale characters with allowing their roles to expand and grow into more than just passive women waiting for their princes. It shows women as strong, powerful and independent (Zipes 3). Female fairytale characters prior to this show really did not have those characteristics associated with them. Prior to this show they were usually shown as being fragile, waiting on a man, dependent on a father, and very reserved (Zipes 4). Female fairy characters were typically princesses who did not do any of the heroine roles, like rescuing anyone from life-threatening emergencies or even themselves. They usually waited on true love and finding a husband, which seemed to be the most crucial thing to a woman. The women in this show did have moments of the stereotypical female fairy tale character but for a majority of the time they broke these stereotypes.

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Just by making the main character of this show female, and a heroine, *Once Upon A Time* made a step in a more feminist friendly direction. Fairy tales rarely have female heroines. Emma was not only the heroine of *Once Upon A Time*’s fairy tale story but she is also a successful heroine. She ultimately saves the entire town of Storybrooke and all the fairy tale characters from the curse they have been put under by the Evil Queen/Regina by the end of season one. There were many powerful women all throughout this show and in a variety of roles. Women were not confined to being a princess, nor were they confined to being passive. Many of the women on the show were strong, active, and powerful. This is a positive role model for young women and can set a good example for young girls. When young girls and women see other women that have made it to powerful positions in society they see that their dreams are obtainable and one day they can reach those goals.

There are definitely some positive changes that this show makes to female fairy tale characters and the roles they have in fairy tales. Although this is true the show does stick to some other social beauty standards that are very valued in or society but not necessarily positive for members of society. *Once Upon A Time* is filled with standards that female actors have to fulfill in order to be considered for the roles they are playing. All of the actresses are beautiful, thin and white. These are a few things that society values in women and considers necessary for female characters in television shows. Viewers also seemed to respond well to the characters on the show being in a specific, younger age range. Youth is highly valued and almost essential for being beautiful. This show very much promotes women that are beautiful, thin, whit and young.

Overall *Once Upon A Time* offered a somewhat more feminist retelling of fairy tales by giving women more flexible roles that were not so confined by gender norms or stereotypes of women. The female fairy tale characters in the show are very powerful, strong and independent.
However, despite the positive attributes of this show, it also continued to promote certain negative stereotypes. In particular, *Once Upon A Time* portrayed a uniform ideal of female beauty which all the women are attractive, thin, and young. Moreover, there is also a huge emphasis on being Caucasian. There are very few African American roles on the show, implying that being Caucasian is essential to being worthy of being on the show. This show made some steps towards creating more positive fairy tales for the next generation of young girls and boys, but the show also enforces some similar ideals that are not necessarily positive for viewers of any age, demonstrating the shortcoming of contemporary American television.


<http://www.csun.edu/~bashforth/305_PDF/305_FinalProj/305FP_Gender/WeSaidFeministNotFracturedFairyTales_Winter07.pdf>.


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