Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* appeared in December 1937 and immediately contributed to the history of film. Walt Disney adapted a traditional, *märchen* fairy tale to the style of the romantic comedy films popular in the 1930s to produce the first full-length motion picture in animated cartoon format. The film has the added appeal of depicting the fantastical dimension found in the traditional tale. It fascinated audiences at the time and has continued to charm viewers for the past 60 years (*Variety*).

Problems incurred during the production of Disney’s *Snow White* resulted in many important technical innovations, such as the multiplane camera (Schickel 195), which in themselves gave the film a place in history. Pioneering techniques in animation enhanced Disney’s equally innovative interpretation of the Grimms’ story. The final product fulfilled David Koenig’s statement that “by the time Disney was through with the tales, he had made them his own” (Koenig 14). Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* generally adhered to the Grimms’ version, deviating to depict popular American culture in the areas of romance, comedy, and politics.

Disney's implementation of love at first sight in the film was entirely American, replacing the medieval European idea of coupling strangers. The comedy in it was also an American novelty, as comedy is largely absent from traditional folktales. Political commentary is intrinsic to traditional folktales; Disney included political ideology that was circulating in his own particular society.

Disney had worked with animated shorts that involved animal characters and fairy-tale themes prior to the production of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Starting in 1922, Disney’s Laugh-O-gram company produced cartoons that spoofed classic fairy tales such as “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” and “Cinderella” (Thomas, *Disney’s Art* 34). After these early projects proved successful, Disney turned his thoughts toward the possibility of telling “a fully developed story as other Hollywood studios did” (Thomas, *Disney’s Art* 65).
The romantic comedies Disney wished to emulate contained love, sentiment, and romance in addition to the necessary element of humor (Quirk 9). Märchen with a plot centered around a male/female relationship, such as a quest for a mate, appealed to Disney. The archetypal characters and romantic framework could be developed and interspersed with comedic episodes to produce a film that would be consistent with the popular live Hollywood films. Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* largely follows the pattern of the romantic comedies that were common in Hollywood by the early 1930s—films that "conjured up the worlds of myth and fairy tale" (Babington and Evans 6).

The Romantic school dominated popular films from 1932 until the end of the 1930s (Quirk 9), although the stories in those films reflected the new sexual mores embraced by American society in the 1920s (Ward 179). The late nineteenth century had produced a feminist movement that influenced the new morality (Babington and Evans 13), resulting in the glorification of the heroine in Hollywood films. Disney's *Snow White* also expressed aspects of other genres of the early 1930s, such as the serious romance film and the screwball comedy.

The great romantic films were characterized by their handsome cinematography and fascinating music that were the result of greater technical quality by 1932 and the perfection of sound by 1929 (Quirk 15). Sensitive direction and polished acting "gave depth and coloration" (Quirk 15) to the sometimes eerie plots that frequently combined supernatural fantasy with romance, an example of which is the 1932 hit *Smilin' Through*. Screwball comedy, a spin-off of the romantic comedy genre, involved pranks reminiscent of the Keystone Cops, verbal wit, and stock characters set in upper-class environments (Babington and Evans 2–3). *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), starring Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn, epitomized the screwball genre.

It was with this rich menu of film types to glean from that Walt Disney approached the production of his first feature-length film. Disney incorporated and manipulated components of the different types of the Romantic school to create a successful animation. Following its initial release, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* received enthusiastic reviews. A review in *Variety* stated that "there had never been anything in the theater quite like Walt Disney's 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.'" The review went on to say that "so tender [was] the romance and fantasy" of the film that it would appeal to adults as well as children.

Accustomed to romance and fantasy, audiences of the 1930s found the animation of those elements fascinating, disproving the predictions of many Hollywood filmmakers that
audiences would not tolerate a full-length cartoon film (Thomas, Disney's Art 76). Disney's Snow White was the best-selling film of 1938, in its first release grossing $8 million at a time when movie tickets averaged 23 cents for adults and 10 cents for children (Thomas, Disney's Art 77).

Later in the century, as Walt Disney's subsequent fairy-tale films appeared, his work began drawing negative criticism that pertained especially to the story interpretations. The Walt Disney company released two additional films based on märchen in the 1950s: Cinderella (February 1950) and Sleeping Beauty (January 1959). By the 1970s a modest body of literary criticism, generated mainly by feminist critics, had been directed toward Disney's fairy-tale films. In 1992, the success of the company's Beauty and the Beast spurred the re-release of the earlier films. A new showing of the early films created even greater interest in analyzing Disney's work.

Currently a new field of scholarship that concentrates on the study of the Disney ideology and contains much critical analysis of Disney films is emerging (Chris 8). The literature consists of scholarly studies emanating from many different disciplines. The bulk of the criticism addressing Walt Disney's märchen films explores the nature of the story adaptations and evaluates the films' social worth as harbingers of, or resisters to, change. The story criticism is largely negative and seems to be lacking insight into Disney's personality and production methods as well as his interest in the popular culture of his time. Misinterpretation of the traditional story patterns and settings also appears to be a problem. Much scholarship has also been directed toward the graphic images in Disney films. That area of criticism—which is beyond the scope of this article—is positive because, as Richard Schickel stated, Walt Disney's genius was for the "exploitation of technological innovation" (23). Walt Disney changed the traditional fairy tale of "Snow White" in ways that reflected the popular culture and social climate of the United States at the time of the film's release. His film's characters, narrative structure, and symbols remained the same, while the tone, detail, and medium changed (Hearne 140). Fairy-tale scholars agree that all storytellers alter these variable elements (Darton 16; Lüthi 34). Renowned fairy-tale scholar Jack David Zipes has stated, "We must understand what Walt Disney did to the fairy tale and why" (Fairy 74). A careful examination of Disney's adaptation of the story also provides insight into how he adapted later fairy-tale films.

**Choosing Snow White**

Biographers and critics have speculated over Walt Disney's choice of "Snow White" for his first feature-length animated film. Critic Kay F. Stone stated that the Grimms' "Snow White" was an obvious choice for the Disney brothers ("Three" 52), but she did not offer reasons for her conclusion. Sound logic for Walt Disney's selection of a märchen for this cherished project can be retrieved from existing documentation, and Bob Thomas's studies show that it was Walt Disney alone, not the two brothers, who decided to adapt "Snow White."

In 1934 following a staff supper, Walt Disney met with chief animators on the sound stage and acted out the "Snow White" story. A master storyteller, Disney brought tears to the eyes of his staff. He then announced that the story would be the studio's first feature film (Thomas Disney's Art 65). In a 1937 interview for Photoplay Studies, Disney stated that he had seen the play "Snow White" when he was a boy. He said he enjoyed it so much that he wanted to see it again and again (Bauer 18). His comment measured the appeal of folklore. Referring to the story as a popular folktales (Bauer 18), Disney stated that he thought the story was known and loved all over the world. He apparently wanted a recognizable story with known characters, since his film would lack the name recognition associated with famous actors. Thomas stated that the "play" Disney viewed was actually a movie he attended while working as a newsboy in Kansas City, a job he pursued from 1910 to 1916 (Walt Disney 32, 39). Along with many other newsboys, Disney was invited to see a showing of the silent film Snow White, starring Marjorie Clark (Thomas, Disney's Art 65). The experience of seeing the

Walt Disney wanted a recognizable story with known characters, since the film would lack the name recognition of real-life actors.
The wicked Queen in Disney's Snow White was inspired by Lady Macbeth and the popular Big Bad Wolf.

Distributed that the universal appeal of Mickey Mouse can be traced to 12,000-year-old fertility symbols rooted in the folklore of primitive peoples (Thomas, Disney's Art 17).

Fairy-tale scholar Jack David Zipes states that Disney's early work with fairy tales displayed a wry and irreverent attitude toward the traditional stories and a tendency to turn the tales inside out, which Zipes perceives as a revolutionary treatment (Breaking the Disney 39) and a form of social commentary. Zipes believes that Disney abandoned this approach with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs because the previous spoofing is absent in the feature-length film. Unquestionably, Disney turned the tales upside down in the cartoon shorts, but careful study reveals that Snow White also received
a significant revolutionary treatment that embodied important social commentary. In Snow White, this dimension of the film was implemented through a more disciplined approach that is actually more consistent with the classic fairy-tale structure. Disagreeing with Zipes, Kay F. Stone concluded that by the time Disney started to work on his full-length fairy-tale films he had come to a mature understanding of fairy-tale literature and wanted to take the tales seriously ("Fairy" 41).

Snow White marked the beginning of Walt Disney's masterpiece productions. In discussions on animation Disney told interviewers and audiences that he believed fantastical things must be based on the real—that it is first necessary to know the real. The great filmmaker who was "always working on a story" (Koenig 15) undoubtedly familiarized himself with the original folk tale before attempting to adapt it to film.

The Influence of Popular Culture

Walt Disney schooled himself on developments in live film production in Hollywood and kept abreast of important events in contemporary society. In 1928 when he was creating Mickey Mouse, Disney was already drawing ideas from current events for story lines. The cartoon short "Plane Crazy" animated the exploits of popular aviator Charles Lindbergh (Thomas, Disney's Art 12). When the first talkie, The Jazz Singer, came out, Disney subsequently produced the first cartoon with synchronized sound, "Steamboat Willie" (Thomas, Disney's Art 14). Stating that Walt Disney was "always parroting the feature length mainstream films" Thomas wrote that "Steamboat Willie" was a takeoff on Buster Keaton's comedy Steamboat Bill (Disney's Art 14). Disney's affinity for fairy tales and comedy combined with his interest in current events led him to the romantic comedy genre in the early 1930s. As in the case of fairy tales, the stories in the genre had "simple plots" that an imaginative director could embellish (Quirk 21).

Thomas also commented that Disney chose the story of Snow White because it had the elements of the popular full-length films coming out of Hollywood in the 1930s: romance with an attractive hero/heroine, menace from an evil villain, comedy and heart, and a happy ending (65). The "Snow White" fairy tale had a happy ending, and Disney thought of it as a timeless folklore story (Thomas 65). In addition to the required happy ending, it contained an evil villain in the dual character of the Queen/Witch, and its element of romance could be developed to match the type so integral to live Hollywood films. Disney thought that by incorporating these elements into the fairy tale, along with a dimension of comedy provided by the dwarfs, he
could produce an animated full-length film consistent with the Hollywood formula (Thomas 65).

Kay F. Stone concluded that of all the Hollywood elements Disney strove to incorporate into his story, the one he particularly emphasized was romance ("Things" 43). Stone's point is well taken, but what is also apparent is that comedy went hand-in-hand with romance in the Disney version of Snow White, and the two elements combined with political commentary to set a pattern for future Disney films. The fact that Walt Disney emphasized fantastic romance is significant.

The concept of combining fantasy and romance did not originate with Walt Disney but emerged over a long period first in literature and then in film. Giambattista Basile's sixteenth-century Pentamerone dealt explicitly with sexual themes in folk stories. In the seventeenth century, Marie d'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault transformed oral tradition into literary tales, creating a new genre known as contes des fées—oral fairy tales (Zipes, Breaking the Magic 23). Contes des fées forged a link between folktales and magical romance in the public mind (McGlathery 1, 10).

In the following century Madame de Villeneuve wrote fairy-tale romances based on oral narration combined with extant fairy tales (Hearne 13). Kunstmärchen (literary fairy tales) emerged as a favorite vehicle of the Romantic writers in the nineteenth century. It involved careful description, characterization, and plot development that embraced complex conflicts with many meanings and moods (Thalmann vi; Lithi 50). The same components characterized the Romantic school of film.

Following on this rich precedent of story interpretation, Disney employed the techniques of the Romanticism, adhering more closely to the folktale than did many of his predecessors. Disney retained the stable structures of "Snow White," changing only unessential details to accommodate his innovations. Production notes describe the story meetings in which staff writers perfected a script for an 83-minute movie with characters not found in the established Disney repertoire (Thomas, Disney's Art 67). To "flush out" the characters and coordinate their actions with the plot (Koenig 14), Disney chose actress Janet Gaynor as an inspiration for the character of Snow White, and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. inspired the character of the Prince. The film's villain, the evil Queen, personified a mixture of Lady Macbeth and the popular character the Big Bad Wolf (Thomas, Disney's Art 130).

The popular film theme of triangular love was shown in the interaction of Snow White, the Queen, and the Prince.

The popular film theme of triangular love was shown in the interaction of Snow White, the envious Queen, and the Prince.

Other themes included an aging romantic suffering humiliation such as in The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone (the Queen), romantic preoccupation with death such as in Smilin' Through (the death sleep/spell), altruism of unselfish giving through the care of others such as in The Blue Veil (Snow White and the dwarfs), and romance against a historical background such as in That Hamilton Woman (Quirk 9–10). Disney's heroine was idealistic and pure spirited, different from the others around her (Quirk 29). One of the most important and appealing aspects of Snow White is its exploration of childhood as a time of deep introspection, focusing particularly on the childhood sorrows of a lonely misfit, embodied in the characters of both Snow White and the dwarf Dopey (Quirk 30).

Walt Disney no doubt saw himself as his main character, having suffered a harsh, lonely childhood during which he was subject to the dictates of a tyrannical parent. He and his siblings worked hard but received no allowance or playthings (Schickel 48). Forced to deliver newspapers for his father's paper route in Kansas City from the age of nine, Walt Disney suffered nightmares over the experience for the rest of his life (Schickel 55). Enduring such a childhood, it is entirely understandable that fantasy, love, and happy endings appealed to the great American storyteller.

Unlike the traditional Snow White, Disney's heroine was never a little girl. In Disney's film, her maidenly beauty and her budding romance with the Prince are what set her at odds with the aging Queen. The Queen observes Snow White with the Prince in the courtyard and is consumed with envy. Learning that the princess has displaced her as the "fairest in the land," the Queen decides to regain her position through murder. She orders a huntsman to bring the unsuspecting princess into the woods and kill her, bringing her Snow White's heart in a box as a token of the deed, a gruesome symbol of the love she hoped to kill. Motifs from this storyline are adapted from the folktale. But in the Grimms' version, the heart was mentioned only in association with envy—the Queen's envious one. In the Disney version the heart is symbolic of love, and the Queen is heartless, her primary emotion being envy.

In the film, the appearance of the Prince leads to the conflict. Instead of appearing only briefly at the end of the story, as in the Märchen, Disney's Prince appears in the first scene, when Snow White is working and daydreaming of "the one" she could love. In the classic fairy-tale tradition, magic intervenes on behalf of an oppressed person to ameliorate a dreary existence, a wel-
come dream of relief for Americans suffering through the Great Depression. The Prince’s two appearances seem to be more a part of the magic than of the realistic setting.

The Heroine

Disney’s Snow White paralleled the popular heroines of the 1930s. Feminist activity initiated in the 1920s increased in the 1930s in the United States, and by 1933 “truly liberated” heroines appeared in popular films (Ware 88, 181). These women were resourceful individuals who not only survived but found a measure of freedom and independence in spite of their second-class status in a patriarchal society. The archetype was derived from folklore heroines who lived in a similar situation.

The description of Snow White in the traditional tale was changed to fashion her after the romantic leading ladies of the day. Instead of being associated with the morbidity of blood, Disney’s Snow White was identified with the beauty of a flower. Rather than the Grimms’ character, “who was as white as snow, as red as blood, and whose hair was as black as ebony” (see Manheim), Disney’s princess was described as one whose “lips are as red as a rose.”

Popular Hollywood films of the 1930s commonly included the motif of a heroine taking refuge in the living quarters of men to avoid an unpalatable destiny arranged by others. The motif existed in all of the “Snow White” versions, which made the story particularly desirable for the time. In the 1931 film Susan Lenox, Her Fall and Rise the heroine ran away from a forced marriage and hid in the cabin of a construction worker (Ward 181). A storm forced Greta Garbo’s character in Queen Christina, who was also facing an arranged match, to share a room with the envoy of the Spanish king (Ward 182). In both films the harboring hero afforded some protection from the fearful fate. Snow White’s residency in the dwarfs’ cottage after fleeing the evil Queen coincided with this popular Hollywood motif. The remote cottage-in-the-woods setting accommodated the romantic element further when the characters’ evening entertainment turned to storytelling. The dwarfs requested a love story, so Snow White told them of her Prince.

The Romance

In the traditional fairy tales the symbolism and significance of certain numbers is important. The incorporation of popular American romance around Snow White and the Prince inspired Walt Disney to minimize the symbolism of traditional fairy numbers—three, seven, twelve, and one hundred—and emphasize the number two throughout the film. Certainly, there are seven dwarfs, but the animals appear in pairs, most noticeably, a pair of turtle doves that stay near Snow White and a pair of vultures that follow the Queen. Snow White and the Prince, of course, are the central pair. A subtle use of the number two also surfaces in the Queen’s two physical forms.

The romantic interpretation of Disney’s story continues in the spell cast by the evil Queen. Snow White could promise that its magic could bring forth her Prince. Another use of symbolism is apparent in the scene when at the Queen’s approach a shadow falls across Snow White, foretelling her doom.

Once Snow White and the Prince are reunited, Disney’s romantic theme minimizes the chauvinism of the Prince’s behavior, which is found in the Grimms’ version, and the chauvinism found in the traditional marriage motif that is incorporated in many fairy tales. In the Grimms’ version, the Prince happens upon the comatose Snow White sleeping in her glass coffin as he and his retinue travel through the forest on their way to their kingdom. He reads on the side of the coffin that Snow White was the daughter of a king and then attempts to buy her from the dwarfs. Influenced by the Prince’s infatuation for the sleeping Snow White, the dwarfs yield and give her to him. The spell is broken quite by accident when the Prince’s servants jostle the coffin and jar the apple bite from Snow White’s mouth. The princess

be roused from her death sleep only by love’s first kiss—an original Disney motif. The kiss is also evidence that Disney was creating for adults as well as children. In the Grimms’ story the witch provides no antidote to the spell because she intended the death to be permanent; the spell depends on the princess succumbing to the ploys of the disguised Queen. In the Disney film, the lure of romance leads to Snow White’s demise at the hands of the disguised Queen. Consistent with folk/fairy-tale style, Disney used symbolism to enhance the presentation of the story. Snow White yields to the temptation of the apple on the romantic awakes in the presence of strangers and marries a man who is unknown to her, a common practice for young women in medieval Europe. Daughters of noble families—indeed any family that was prosperous—were often betrothed while they were still in their cradles (Shahar 132). Parents as well as overlords participated in arranged marriages that were based on class as well as on economic and political advantages (Shahar 132, 131). The Disney writers decided that their Snow White story would be “more romantic” if the prince and princess met long before the final kiss (Thomas, Walt Disney 28). American audiences may not have

Snow White could be roused from her death sleep only by love’s first kiss—an original Disney motif.
the lure of romance finally leads to Snow White’s demise at the hands of the disguised Queen.

Disney’s adaptation of “Snow White”

accepted a marriage of two strangers that was completely devoid of romantic attachment. Because American society lacked a nobility, arranged marriages were never commonplace. By the 1930s Americans had been presented with heroines of the caliber of Mae West, the most popular woman in film at the time (Ward 182). A young woman forced into an unwanted marriage would be hard to swallow for an audience that idolized a heroine who trod her own destiny and lived on her own terms (Ward 183). For this reason, Disney’s Snow White became acquainted early on with the man whom she fashioned from her own imagination and desire.

Disney’s Prince also plays the role of now White’s deliverer, but rather than purchasing the princess from the dwarfs and reviving her accidentally, he finds the heroine after a long search that was understood to be continual, even though he was not visible throughout most of the film. The devotion and desire of Snow White and the Prince for each other during their long separation represented another motif present in the popular romantic films of the 1930s as well as in many folktales. The innovation of the Disney film was that Disney’s heroine awakened as the result of human contact, and the kiss, symbolic of true love, initiated a lifelong union between the heroine and her chosen mate. The change reflected the romantic myth in its American, rather than its European, form.

The expansion of the element of romance constituted one of the ways in which Walt Disney adapted the Grimms’ “Snow White.” Other changes expressed Disney’s desire to include the humor found in romantic comedies or the expression of political commentary. The collapse of the national economy during the Great Depression convinced many Americans that the political and economic systems in the United States were not working effectively, and alternative political ideologies emerged (Laidler 17).

The Politics

One political system that attracted a large number of followers during the thirties was socialism, an idea that had been spreading through the country since the late nineteenth century (Laidler 6). Walt Disney’s father, Elias Disney, turned to socialism and instilled a respect for it in his sons. Bob Thomas stated that Elias Disney followed socialist leader Eugene Debs and retained socialist ideas throughout
his lifetime (Walt Disney 147). The spirit of cooperation and community (Laidler 4) espoused by American socialist reformers is evident in Walt Disney's first feature-length film.

Thomas states that creating the roles of the dwarfs constituted an overwhelming part of the production of the film (Disney's Art 69). Thomas concluded that it was Disney's intention to show solidarity and a work ethic among the dwarfs in their daily march to the mine (Disney's Art 68). Zipes also commented on this segment of the film, stating that the dwarfs worked hard and talked about their solidarity and, more important, cooperation.

On the basis of this, one would be tempted to think that Disney was promoting the Spencerian idea that if the laboring classes were willing to work hard they could achieve success. The idea, was, of course, an obtuse philosophy during the Great Depression when there was no work to be found. However, on closer inspection it becomes apparent that the themes of solidarity and cooperation—basic tenets in the socialism that swept the United States during the depression—occur in every work scene in the film. Furthermore, Disney created the need for work in some scenes to present these ideas.

For example, showing the resourcefulness associated with many märchen and Hollywood heroines, Snow White decided that all she really needed to survive was a place to stay—a place to belong. In the Grimm's tale Snow White happens upon a cottage that is spruce and tidy. But in the Disney film, despite the producer's own obsession with cleanliness and order (Schickel 24), the woodland creatures led Snow White to the messy cottage of the seven dwarfs. The cottage seems to be the answer to the maiden's dilemma. Instead of being told by the dwarfs that she must work, as in the Grimm's story, Disney's heroine offers to trade her cooking and cleaning abilities for room and board. She demonstrates to the dwarfs that she can in fact manage the tasks, but she does not undertake cleaning the cottage all by herself as in the traditional tale (Shaman 55–56). She delegates tasks to the animals, and they all work together to accomplish the goal. A great spirit of cooperation is shown in tidying the cottage; there is no competition among characters and no excessive work load placed on anyone. The scene gave
Walt Disney's adaptation of the story has decided American flavor, as it depicts the values of democracy that in the 1930s were considered by many Americans to include a dimension of socialism, a political system that entails cooperation and glorifies labor (Milton).

To encourage the animals in their work, Snow White sings a song of solidarity. She urges them to "whistle while you work" and points out that "cheerful together we can tidy up this place." Labor songs abounded in the depression era, and Walt Disney captured this aspect of American society. John Steinbeck wrote of this phenomenon, saying that the songs of the working people have always been their sharpest statement—the one statement that cannot be destroyed. Their hopes, hurts, fears, wants, and aspirations are expressed in their songs (Steinbeck 8). The dwarfs also sing work songs as they labor. They own a diamond mine, but in the spirit of good social democrats, they place little value on the jewels, valuing instead the hard work. They sing, "We dig up the diamonds / By the score / But we don't know / What we dig them for."

The work songs from Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs were heard on every radio station in 1937; "Whistle While You Work" and "Heigh Ho" became popular hit tunes (Thomas, Disney's Art 143).

Zipes's statement that the dwarfs in Snow White were symbolic of American workers who pulled together during the Great Depression can only be interpreted as a reference to the labor union movement at that time, as primary historical documents indicate that the economic crisis did not create an atmosphere of peace and brotherhood among the general population (see Terkel). The labor union movement, however, did crystalize in the 1930s, more because the labor leaders finally decided to stand solidly together than because of any coordinated movement on the part of the workers.

During the depression, the American Labor Party (ALP) fell under the control of Communists who alienated the Socialists (Laidler 17). The Socialist Democratic Federation dissociated from the ALP, but the conservative labor leaders joined the Communists, adopting their tactics to win concessions for labor (Laidler 17). Walt Disney's leanings were socialist, and the conflict between his party and the totalitarian Communists was also portrayed in Snow White. Doc, who was the leader of the dwarfs, represented the "pompous . . . self-appointed" union leaders of the period (Thomas, Disney's Art 68). Through the dwarfs' work scenes, Disney was promoting a utopian alternative to the existing order. Zipes's studies on fairy tales have identified this function of the traditional tales (Breaking the Magic 3) that Walt Disney pursued.

The idea that Walt Disney would depict the political climate of his day in Snow White is not surprising because his political ideas were also present in his early work with cartoons. In his first attempts at drawing cartoons, the young animator created a conventional capitalist "bloated and wearing a vest decorated with dollar signs standing in opposition to a laboring man wearing the traditional hand-fashioned paper hat" such as newspaper printers made and wore (Schickel 58).

The story in Disney's highly successful cartoon short "The Three Little Pigs" appealed to Disney because millions of Americans were trying to "keep the wolf from the door" (Thomas, Disney's Art 48). The song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" became a rallying cry across the nation for hungry, unemployed people. Walt Disney's political ideas surfaced in all his märchen films.

Conclusion

Walt Disney's adaptation of the Grimms' "Snow White" into the film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs must be viewed in terms of scholarly studies on märchen that state that every epoch altered traditional folktales according to its needs (Zipes, Breaking the Magic 6) and that individual compilers clothed fairy tales in the garb of their own time (Lüthi 34). A comparison of the film to the märchen tales indicates that Disney's interpretation did not depart drastically from its traditional counterpart but was merely adapted to embrace the values and social mores of Disney's particular society.

The adaptations occur mainly in terms of detail, and the overall difference is one of tone. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs reflects popular culture of the time through its development of the romantic element, and American political ideals are displayed in the work scenes, which depict democracy as it was perceived in the 1930s. The augmentation of the seven dwarfs provided the comic relief so popular at the time. Disney's first animated full-length film established a pattern of romantic love infused with political undertones and comedy, which would be applied to the later animated films based on traditional fairy tales and to all the animated films produced by the Walt Disney Company after Walt Disney's death.

A comment by Charles Clayton Morrison punctuates Walt Disney's deep appreciation of märchen. In answer to the contemporary argument that Snow White was popular because
of its fantasy, through which people were trying to escape the harsh reality of the depression and the war in Europe, Morrison stated, “Snow White is a form of art that provides an escape not from reality but to a larger reality” (886). The traditional folktales had the same function in past societies. Max Lüthi has stated that the focal point in fairy tales is an individual’s deliverance from an unauthentic existence into the commencement of true life (138).

Disney animator Don MacManus commented that “[o]ur business is to present something in an unreal way to make it seem more real” (Thomas, Disney’s Art 74). It is significant to note that Disney’s preservation of the fantastical essence of traditional “faerie” was as significant as were his changes. Fairy-tale scholar Betsy Gould Hearne has stated that a strong story is defined by its core of elements; the strong storyteller is defined by respect for that core (141). Disney’s first full-length fairy-tale film exhibited that respect. Disney’s art, pioneered in a fairy tale, created real ideas and values that initially reflected the popular culture in the United States and then finally, in a variety of films, dictated popular culture to that same society.

Walt Disney’s work with fairy-tale films has influenced popular culture in the United States throughout the twentieth century, an indication of his strong sense of story. As Hearne stated in her book, “The marriage of abiding story with abiding craft is ideal” (140). Walt Disney’s film Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs established the definitive ideal for the popular American fairy tale.

WORKS CITED


NOTES

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1. Märchen is a folk tale derived from the oral tradition that has a plot centered around a male/female relationship.

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