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## **From Conflict to Concord: Lessons from the Mouse**

**By Mead K. Hunter**

### **Abstract**

Walt Disney Company's dramatic strategies have long been the focus of vociferous cultural criticism. Some blame "the Mouse" for bankrupting western storytelling traditions, while others extol the narrative skill that has gone into crafting numerous folk and fairy tale adaptations. Recently, however, with the advent of global markets both established and nascent, the company's Imagineers are finding that Joseph Campbell's classic monomyth of the hero's journey (long regarded as Disney's go-to dramatic structure) is not universal, as was once claimed by many literary and anthropological scholars. Therefore as Disney continues to expand its international ventures, an active search is underway for new storytelling models capable of refreshing the company brand by taking advantage of and building upon indigenous mythologies. Storytellers of all stripes, whether commercial, academic or artistic, can glean much from Disney's cultural excavations, some of which eschew the western dependence on conflict as the engine of plot.

## From Conflict to Concord: Lessons from the Mouse

By Mead K. Hunter

Disney is changing. The growth of its new international venues, especially the most recent theme park in Shanghai, is leading to a reconsideration of the familiar, tried and true tropes and their readymade narratives. The ramifications for the corporation's upcoming theatrical productions are potentially huge, and there's much that we as scholars of narratology can glean from its findings.

To start with an understatement, the Walt Disney Company (the Mouse, in popular parlance) is a pervasive influence, regarded as reassuringly felicitous by many and as pernicious by others. So any assay of the company's dramatic storytelling tropes is a hazardous and even presumptuous endeavor, given that most readers are already authorities on the subject.

You can test this supposition right now by thinking back on your own experience with Disney films, especially the animated ones. What is the basic story? If asked to recount the bare bones of a typical Disney narrative, chances are you'd come up with something like this:

- A reluctant hero starts out on a mission.
- All goes well at first.
- Threats soon intervene and complications ensue.
- At the moment when it looks like all is lost, the hero is victorious after all.
- S/he returns home with some kind of gift or advantage for the community.

You recognized this outline with no difficulty, and that’s a problem for the Mouse. In recent years, many people who are highly placed in the company—most particularly those in the upper echelon of the Imagineering Studio, known as Imagineers—have questioned whether the old tropes have become so overfamiliar as to have lost their effectiveness as narratives.

With this question pending, the company hired me in 2014 to serve as a dramaturg for the Imagineering Studio—in other words, not as an outside consultant like any other, but specifically one accustomed to assessing the structures and intents of live entertainment. If this seems like a surprising strategy, consider that a significant number of executives and designers working as Imagineers today originally came from the theater. Their collective understanding of how performance works is precisely their value to the company. Many of these same people have worked with dramaturgs in the past and understand the professional function.

Hence I was hired to observe and evaluate all the live entertainment in the domestic markets. This was to include the stage shows in their various forms as well the “atmo” presentations—the live performances that pop up everywhere in the parks, seemingly spontaneously, as a way of creating atmosphere. Atmo acts can include everything from a trio of “pirates” singing and playing the squeezebox in the French Quarter, to a trio of EPCOT janitors using their trashcans as drums, to an entire company of young “newsboys” jumping off a streetcar in the California Experience to relate in song the Disney brothers’ struggles and victories. Stage shows ranged from condensed versions of the Broadway shows (*Aladdin*, *Beauty and the Beast*) to original jukebox musicals performed every night on the cruises. All in all, I had three weeks of immersion in the Disney galaxy,

which included time spent in Disneyland in Southern California, Walt Disney World in Florida, and the Disney Dream Cruise that travels to the Bahamas and back. The experience was comparable to what permanent Disney hires undergo during their orientations.

Following all this, I delivered a series of talks at the Imagineering Studios in Burbank, California, in a setting similar to an in-house, casual version of a TED Talk. To reiterate, the question at stake in the discussions was: does Disney rely too much on standard, tried-and-true narratives to the point where those narratives are less effective? Are the old story formulas allowing audiences to get ahead of the stories to such a degree that they're bored by them?

The simple fact that this question can even be asked reflects a quiet dichotomy operating within the company nowadays, one that may ultimately represent a contest for the very soul of Disney. In one camp you have the conservatives—those who believe the company's entertainments should be market driven and therefore strive to give the people the classic company brand; in the other camp are the innovators – those who feel Disney should drive the market. "It's easy to say we should always go for the innovation," one of the more reserved Imagineers told me. "But people flock to the parks every year because they want the story of their childhoods, not to see the cutting edge of performance." Yet not everyone in the company believes this—hence my consultancy.

Gradually, as I developed responses and ideas about all I was experiencing and discussed these observations with various Imagineers, a hidden imperative came to the fore: the new audiences visiting the international parks. Many in these constituencies have not necessarily grown up with a

steady diet of Disneyana—or, for that matter, come to the parks conversant in the largely European fairy tales and folk legends that traditionally have been Disney's stock in trade.

A brief segue into history here. Disney's inaugural foray into international theme parks was Tokyo Disneyland, which opened in 1983. Although profitable, it became evident upon opening that simply importing the original Disneyland of Anaheim, California, with its covalent ideologies, was not the best plan. To give just one material example, Walt Disney's famous injunction against alcohol in his parks was a shocker to the Japanese, who expect sake to be served everywhere.

Apparently Disney was slow to learn these lessons, because the alcohol challenge returned with the advent of Euro Disney, which opened near Paris in 1994. Practically every French adult arrived at the park assuming wine would be served with lunch. Initially it was not. Moreover the park's name itself was perplexing; why would an amusement venue share the name of the regional currency? Euro Disney was quickly changed to Paris Disney in that same year.

More interesting for our purposes, however, is the question of which stories transfer interculturally and which do not. In Tokyo, the Mouse assumed that a longstanding acquaintance with its movies and characters could be taken for granted. While to a degree this was true, there was still a learning curve in relation to what characters were readily relatable and which needed some acculturation. If you go to the park today, 30 years after the original opening, you may be amused to find some of Disney's most iconic characters dressed in kimonos.

But what about content – the narratives Disney imported? You won't be surprised to hear that these relied, then as now, almost wholly on the old idea of the "monomyth" promulgated by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in 1959. We need not debate the flaws in Campbell's basic thesis in this forum, but we should acknowledge that these ideas very much hold sway in popular culture to this very day. In short this is the fond belief that there is one overarching story underlying all cultures everywhere and at all times.

Disney banks heavily on a finite set of variations of the basic monomyth, so the company is right to worry that these tropes are wearing out their welcome. And in fact, with the advent of all the foreign markets (Shanghai Disney just celebrated its June 2016 opening), the time is right for exploring which indigenous dramaturgies could refresh the brand.

Let's briefly review Campbell's notion of the monomyth, since it's so central to Disney storytelling. According to narratologists (e.g., Jewett and Lawrence, Ellwood), the basic idea of the hero's journey has seven major variations:

1. *Overcoming the Monster*. This is the perennial favorite, in which the hero must vanquish an obstacle to success that is embodied by a person, creature, condition, or other menacing impediment. For popular modern variations, we could cite *Star Wars* and *The Hobbit*.
2. *The Quest*. The hero goes on a journey—often reluctantly—is tested, and ultimately brings back something that saves or at least improves his or her community. Think *The Lord of the Rings* or *Finding Nemo*.
3. *Rags to Riches*. The hero endures hardships through no fault of his/her own, and eventually overcomes everything to come out on top. This

has been enormously popular at specific times in Western history, such as the UK and US industrial periods. Disney version: *Cinderella*.

4. *Voyage and Return*: The hero embarks on a long journey and returns with nothing. Our most primary exemplar: *The Odyssey*. Disney version: *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>1</sup>
5. *Comedy*: For narratologists, this term refers specifically to what we would more colloquially refer to as the rom-com. Two people who are obviously meant for each other start out at cross-purposes, yet wind up together anyway, as we knew they would from the very start. Popular instances of this story are innumerable—everything from *Much Ado about Nothing* to *When Harry Met Sally*. Disney iterations: *The Little Mermaid*, *Tangled*.
6. *Tragedy*: The hero dies. This is not a popular genre in the West currently; it never was with Disney. The only Disney example that comes to mind is *Old Yeller*.<sup>2</sup>
7. *Rebirth*: In this storytelling strain, the improbable hero is an unlikeable or at least unpleasant character who is redeemed or otherwise recuperated in the course of the story. Our favorite rebirth story is probably *A Christmas Carol*. Currently this variant on the hero's journey is a frequent storytelling resort, at least in the West. Recent Disney successes with it include *Frozen* and *Maleficent*.

In the West, these variations are so standard that we rarely note their ubiquity. However, some of these narrative tropes don't carry the easy exponent of familiarity for Easterners. Many of our ideas of romance, for

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<sup>1</sup> This is not a commonly used motif in Disney culture. It's interesting in this regard that the recent Tim Burton iterations do give Alice something to bring back from her adventures in the form of a moral of sorts.

<sup>2</sup> Arguably our favorite form for the past 70 years or so is the tragicomic form that Aristotle famously deplored, in which the protagonist brushes with tragedy but then uses that close call as his/her ticket to ultimate triumph. Instances abound, but for an old school Disney classic, *Pollyanna* is exemplary.

instance, can seem reckless or even just fatuous to Asian cultures, whereas the rags to riches theme is hugely popular in many Eastern nations. In China, for example, *Cinderella* is highly regarded as a beloved and oft-iterated tale—much to the surprise of Westerners, who are usually unaware that a Chinese version of the tale predates the Brothers Grimm by nearly a thousand years (Zipes 444).

With this in mind, Disney is reconsidering the presumed universality of its standard tropes, and to its credit, it has worked hard to come up with culturally specific tales that could fit within the paradigm of the hero's journey. Much has been made of how closely *The Lion King* conforms to the basic contours of *Hamlet*, for example. But *Lion King* wasn't written with foreign markets in mind. When Disney has consciously attempted this, it has often come under fire from those who feel its borrowings from world culture are less than rigorous.

*Mulan* is a case in point. Disney hoped Chinese legend would build bridges between cultures, but the animated film was not well received by Asian populations. Riddled with gaffes like reducing the traditional dragon guardian spirit to a wisecracking lizard, not to mention the titular hero naming her horse Khan (a title reserved only for emperors), Disney found itself accused of playing fast and loose with other cultures. As Jing Yin points out in her article "Popular Culture and Public Imaginary: Disney vs. Chinese Stories of *Mulan*": "By ignoring the diversity of Chinese culture and inaccurately representing Chinese and other Asian cultures (e.g., Huns for Mongols), Disney essentially portrays non-Western Chinese and other cultures as monolithic Others" (Yin 293-294).



Disney is sensitive to such criticism, and so at least in theory, it's willing to consider that there may be other story structures capable of entertaining audiences. And if those structures are endemic to the society that's hosting a new park, so much the better.

One of the most intriguing literary forms that may hold promise for Disney is known as *kishōtenketsu*. Originally used in Chinese poetry as a four-line composition, it has long since been extended to storytelling, where it also has four parts. In the first part, a story premise is introduced. The next part develops the premise, while the third offers a twist—a new idea that often seems to be only tangentially related to the original storyline or have no apparent connection at all. The fourth and concluding section unites the previous parts and synthesizes them to end the tale.

We can glean a specific example from this outline of a work by 19th-century Japanese writer Rai Sanyō:

1. The story introduces the daughters of General Itoya.
2. The elder daughter is sixteen and the younger one is fourteen.
3. Throughout history, generals killed the enemy with bows and arrows.
4. The daughters of Itoya kill with their eyes (Maynard 34).

To extrapolate, let's look at a contemporary example: the Ryukyuan song by Ikue Asazaki called "Obokuri-Eeumi," which was recently used in the anime series *Samurai Champloo*:

In search of new lands, let us build a new house  
Thatch the roof with reed stalks, gathered neatly in bundles

Thatch the roof with reed stalks, gathered neatly in bundles  
At the stone wall, let us celebrate the golden house, built by a  
hundred carpenters.

At the stone wall, let us celebrate the golden house, built by a  
hundred carpenters  
Let us celebrate the golden house, that was built by a hundred  
carpenters

The eighth month is fast approaching, and yet I have nothing to  
wear  
I want to dress up, so brother, will you lend me just one sleeve?  
I wish to dress my children and loved ones in the one kimono that I  
own  
As for me, I will wear vines that I plucked deep in the mountains

The light of the full moon shines down,  
Illuminating the world with its divine light  
When my lover sneaks in to visit me,  
I wish that the clouds would hide that light just a little.

In the first two verses, Asazaki establishes a theme of quiet celebration over the metaphoric building of a golden house—a new community. The third verse offers a variation on this theme as it continues that theme of sharing and familial love, but the focus shifts to a more personal level. Finally the last verse casts a new perspective on all the previous verses; the song's voice wants to keep something apart from the others, community pride notwithstanding.

The kishōtenketsu concept has also been used in game design, particularly in Nintendo’s video games, most notably *Super Mario* games such as *Super Mario Galaxy* (2007) and *Super Mario 3D World* (2013); their designers Shigeru Miyamoto and Koichi Hayashida are known to utilize this concept for their game designs. (For a fascinating demonstration of how kishōtenketsu has been applied specifically to game structure, consult Mack Brown’s instructional video “Super Mario 3D World's 4 Step Level Design” from his YouTube series *Gamemaker’s Tool Kit*.)

So could this structure be used successfully to provide four-dimensional experiences in the new Shanghai park?

The ramifications of using non-Western structure could be profound for Disney and other professional storytellers. Since in the West, plot is commonly thought to revolve around *conflict*—a confrontation between two or more elements, in which one ultimately dominates the other—naturally there’s a sameness, a predictability, to much plotting. The standard plot modes that permeate Western narratives have conflict written into their very structures. In two-act forms, a conflict in progress hangs in suspension at the close of the first act, which is an implicit promise that the conflict will dominate the second act. In post-play discussions in which the audience is asked to critique a script, any lack of conflict is typically identified as a serious problem (Brown 82-83).

But is the primacy of conflict ineluctable, or is it an ancient truism, received wisdom purportedly handed down from Aristotle himself?<sup>3</sup> Chinese and Japanese writers have used a plot structure of kishōtenketsu

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<sup>3</sup> Visit almost any contemporary screenwriting workshops at random and you may be amused to hear Aristotle revered as the first and last word in dramatic structure.

for centuries, which eschews use of external conflict to hold interest and favors instead an internal sifting of like and unlike factors. In other words, this four-part structure generates plot in the absence of conflict, simply by utilizing contrasting forms of exposition. This is strikingly contrary to the West's belief that plot and conflict are inseparable.

It's interesting that Disney's recent runaway hit, the animated film *Frozen*, feels more closely aligned with the traditional Eastern style of kishōtenketsu than it does to the rebirth trope its fairy tale genre would lead us to anticipate. (The narrative uses Hans Christian Andersen's classic story "The Snow Queen" as a point of departure for the story screenwriter Jennifer Lee wishes to tell.) Rather than providing the standard three-act structure focused on conflict that we expect from a commercial screenplay, the movie deploys a four-part structure focused on resolving its disparate parts into a confluent harmony.

*Frozen's* first act introduces us to Elsa and Anna, specifically Elsa's struggle to gain control over her unwanted powers and Anna's struggle with loneliness. The second act develops when Elsa freezes the town; now her power has overwhelmed her community, and she ejects herself from the family circle. Anna has found a love interest in Hanz, solving her initial problem, but she must still cope with her sister's exile and their frozen kingdom. After Elsa and Anna's contest in the castle of ice, we see Elsa strike out as she continues her struggle for self-control, but in doing so, she harms her sister. This begins the complication, exacerbated by the betrayal of Hanz.

Here is where the deviation from East to West truly shows. Whereas Western storytelling would typically focus on conflict, with one side

eventually overcoming the other, *kishōtenketsu*'s conclusion is one of harmony—specifically of the previous acts (introduction/development/complication) finding peace with one another. *Frozen* resolves its climax with Anna sacrificing herself to save Elsa. In doing so, Elsa expresses her love for her sister, thawing her and saving her life. A new harmony and even society results. Anna, who had struggled with being alone, no longer is so; she has her new friends, but most importantly, her sister. Elsa takes control of her powers, realizing that love was the key to maintaining a balance. We see the initial conflicts entwined with one another, rather than one half exultant at the other's expulsion.

The true antagonist of *Frozen* isn't Hanz or Elsa, but the metaphorical struggle of the two sisters. That's why the real climax comes so much later than the battle on the lake; the story's crisis is not an "overcoming the monster" story at all, but a tale of two sisters learning to overcome their differences and find true peace.

As for non-Asian cultures, for years there has been a rumor, which Disney will neither confirm nor deny, that a new Russian park may be in planning mode or at least in a hypothetical exploratory stage. Supposedly the company is looking at Western Russia in the Kalingrad region.<sup>4</sup> Again this begs the question of whether traditional regional approaches to narrative might come in handy for Disney, enabling it to court a populace with its own ideas of story while simultaneously replenishing the Disney dramatic font. But what exactly could come in handy?

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<sup>4</sup> Formerly a park was rumored to be planned for a location near Yekaterinburg, at the foot of the Ural Mountains, but those plans were scrapped when construction problems became insurmountable.

Once more the narratologists may come to the rescue, and in this case, one no less venerable than Vladimir Propp himself. His seminal 1928 work *Morphology of the Folktale* includes a taxonomy of the Russian fairy tale that suggests many intriguing directions. Perhaps principal among them are the tales of Baba Yaga, the half menacing witch/half kindly old crone figure who sometimes helps people, and sometimes deliberately hinders them, but who more often than not is neutral when it comes to meddling in human affairs (Senelick). Considering that the morally ambiguous character has enjoyed a special status on American television for some time now (Tony Soprano and Don Draper on cable, for example, or Professor Keating from *How To Get Away with Murder* in broadcast programming), probably the time has come for Disney to incorporate this narrative feint into its discourse. In fact, it has already done so once in the character of the mysterious and hilariously unhelpful crone from the animated feature *Brave*.

This gambit of working within extant structures to create entirely new stories is relatively new to Disney. The company is no stranger to adaptation as it is traditionally understood, of course. Recuperating old stories has been Disney's stock in trade from its very inception, starting with *Alice's Wonderland* in 1923. And the breakthrough success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937 set the company agenda for decades. But "cutting within the frame," to borrow a film editing term, is a recent strategy. By recasting a familiar story's original assumptions, storytellers can have it both ways: they get the market value of a tale that's already beloved, and extend its valences into fresh, surprising new narratives. *Frozen* is exemplary in this regard; as a free adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson, the animated film infuses an old nursery room staple with new meaning expressly by trading on audience expectations about it.

Toward this purpose, the *Frozen* screenplay goes to some lengths to ensure viewer presumption that the story is vintage Disney. One of the two protagonists falls in love with a charming prince; as expected he rushes to her aid when she gets into trouble. But wait! This has all been a ruse on the prince's part. He feigned love and laid in wait until he could grab control of the kingdom. This is the reversal we expected, but the writers have another trick in store. We know that Anna needs true love's kiss to save her from perpetual frozenness, so we turn our attention to the next male love interest, who is a commoner, not a royal. How clever, we think. This is a proletariat fable, apparently. But wait! The redemptive kiss ultimately comes from the protagonist's sister, whose unconditional love saves not only the both of them, but also frees their kingdom (or rather queendom) from the grip of eternal winter.

Not everyone was charmed by these reversals of understanding. Some critics have grouched that *Frozen* and other sly feminist glosses (*Tangled*, *Brave*) are wandering too far away from the comforting tropes that built the Mouse's empire. But they are very much in the minority. Box office receipts to date for *Frozen* as well as for the subsequent mega hit *Maleficent* are impressive.

*Maleficent* also mines an extant tale; it's the back story of the witch who cursed Sleeping Beauty and caused her to fall into a state of endless sleep until such a time as true love would come along to awaken her. But study the movie's opening moments and you get an interesting clue as to what you're about to see. Before the story kicks in, during the opening credits, you expect to see the classic Disney logo of the Sleeping Beauty castle. Instead you see a dark, dank ruin of a castle. Only at the end of the movie,

when all differences are reconciled, do we see a lovingly delineated version of the logo we expected to see initially.

I take this as an indication, as well as an implicit promise, that Disney has only just begun to take the lead in exploring new narratologies. And what the Mouse has undertaken for mercantile purposes, we may wish to explore for artistic reason. The classic hero's journey may comfort us by sheer dint of familiarity—or its predictability may pall. Western dramatic traditions can only benefit from an infusion of fresh dramaturgical structures.



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