

An Analysis of the Morphological Differences Between the Film Maleficent and Sleeping Beauty

Lu Tingting

Communication University of China , Beijing City , 100000, China

Abstract: In recent years, Hollywood has attached increasing importance to adapting fairy tale themes into films. As classic works of world fairy tales, the Grimm's Fairy Tales have been repeatedly adapted into animated or live-action films, such as Red Riding Hood, Snow White and the Huntsman, Cinderella, The Frog Prince and Maleficent, all of which are well-loved by audiences. Among them, Sleeping Beauty is one of the classics in the collection of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. In 1959, Disney of the United States released an animated film adapted from the fairy tale of the same name, whose plot was largely consistent with the original story. However, the 2014 Disney live-action film Maleficent made a subversive adaptation of Sleeping Beauty and achieved certain success. Then, did the film adapt the content or the form? Based on the morphological theory of stories proposed by Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist and representative figure of formalism, this paper takes Maleficent as an example, compares it with the story of Sleeping Beauty, and examines the role of character functions, hoping to find the rules of film adaptation, namely the influence of variable and invariable factors on the story.

Keywords: Maleficent; Sleeping Beauty; Story Morphology; Character Functions

1. Vladimir Propp's Morphological Theory of Stories

In 1928, Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, a Russian folklorist, conducted a morphological comparative analysis of 100 Russian magical tales in the collection of Alexander Afanasyev, and summarized 31 functions in magical tales. The so-called "function" refers to "the act of a character defined from the perspective of its significance to the course of action". The concept of character functions can replace the "motif" mentioned by Thompson, the "element" by Bedier, the "structure" by Strauss, and the "archetype" by Jung. All of these refer to narrative elements that cannot be further decomposed, i.e., the original narrative units. The names of characters and items in stories can vary greatly, but character functions serve as the stable and invariable factors of stories, independent of who performs them and how they are performed. From this, Propp drew the conclusion: "Stories often assign the same actions to different characters, which makes it possible to study stories based on character functions."

Propp put forward four main characteristics of the morphology of magical tales: 1. The functions of characters are the invariable factors of stories, independent of who performs them and how they are performed; they constitute the basic components of stories. 2. The number of known functions in magical tales is limited. 3. The sequence of functions is always the same (the degree of freedom of the sequence is very narrow). 4. All fairy tales are of the same type in terms of their composition^[1]. Alan Dundes, a renowned American folklorist, stated in the preface to the 1968 English edition of *Morphology of the Folktale*: "Propp's system can be applied to other genres beyond fairy tales and other media containing narratives—novels, dramas, comic strips, films and television programs"^[2], "We learn from Propp that many modern narratives borrow not the content itself but the structure from fairy tales"^[3]. However, at present, Hollywood live-action films adapted from fairy tales not only draw materials from magical tales but also borrow the narrative formulas of fairy tales.

2. The Functional Structure in Sleeping Beauty and Maleficent

2.1 Initial Situation

The initial situation generally introduces the background of the story. The story begins with the initial situation, introducing the future protagonist by describing the family members or mentioning the name and status of the protagonist. In *Sleeping Beauty*, the initial situation introduces the family background: "The queen gave birth to a very beautiful daughter, and the king was so happy that he decided to hold a grand banquet." Here, the protagonist, the princess, is introduced. In *Maleficent*, since the protagonist has changed, the plot that originally served as the initial situation in *Sleeping Beauty* becomes a way of character introduction. The initial situation changes to: "There was deep estrangement between two neighboring kingdoms. It was said that only a great hero or a tyrannical monarch could unify them. One kingdom was ruled by an arrogant and greedy king who had long coveted the wealth of the neighboring kingdom, while the other kingdom, the Moors, was inhabited by a group of strange creatures, among whom there was a fairy with magic named Maleficent—she was the protagonist of the story."

2.2 The Functions of Core Characters in the Film *Sleeping Beauty*

"Function" is an important concept proposed by Propp, and only some of the functions exist in *Sleeping Beauty*. "At the princess's christening ceremony, three fairies (donors) took turns to bestow blessings on the little princess. However, after the blessing of the second fairy, the evil witch Maleficent (villain) suddenly appeared in the hall and cast a curse on the princess (villainy), making Princess Aurora prick her finger on a spinning wheel spindle and die on her 16th birthday. After Maleficent left, the third fairy, who had not yet given her blessing, changed the death curse into a sleeping curse. The king ordered all spinning wheels in the country to be burned, and asked the three fairies to take the princess away from home and raise her secretly (prohibition). The witch sent her subordinates to constantly search for the princess's whereabouts (reconnaissance), but they never found her. Until the princess's 16th birthday, the fairies wanted to give the princess a birthday surprise and thus used magic (violation of prohibition), leading the witch to learn the princess's whereabouts. Driven by the witch's curse, the princess pricked her finger on the spinning wheel and fell into a deep sleep, which could only be broken by true love's kiss (lack). After the fairies informed Prince Philip of the disaster or lack, the prince underwent trials, and with the help of the fairies (receipt of a magical agent), he defeated Maleficent (villain vanquished), saved the princess (initial misfortune resolved), and finally the protagonist married the prince and lived happily ever after."

2.3 The Functions of Core Characters in *Maleficent*

When Maleficent was a child, she met a boy who broke into the forest. Here, the prohibition was that the magical forest could not have contact with humans, but the prohibition was broken, and she fell in love with the boy. The boy "attempted to deceive" Maleficent into drinking a potion for the sake of the throne; "the victim was deceived", and the boy carried out the "villainy" act, resulting in the "lack" of Maleficent's wings. The boy became the king and had a daughter with the queen. At the christening ceremony, Maleficent appeared and cast a curse on the princess, making her prick her finger on a spinning wheel spindle and fall into eternal sleep on her 16th birthday, unless she met true love's kiss. To protect the princess, the king secretly sent her to be raised by three fairies and burned all spinning wheels or put them in the palace dungeon. Maleficent always kept an eye on the princess's growth and became her godmother. On the princess's 16th birthday, Maleficent tried to lift her own curse, but the princess still pricked her finger on the spinning wheel and fell into a deep sleep. Maleficent found the prince, but the prince failed to wake the princess; instead, it was Maleficent's true love's kiss that saved the princess (misfortune resolved). After waking up, the princess released the wings that had been cut off by the king, and the wings returned to Maleficent (lack resolved). The king and Maleficent fought a great battle (hero's confrontation with the villain); after the king was defeated, Maleficent returned to the magical forest and crowned the princess as the queen.

2.4 Comparative Analysis of Character Functions in the Two Films

The animated film *Sleeping Beauty* mainly contains 14 functions, arranged in the following order: Initial Situation — Prohibition 1 — Departure — Reconnaissance — Prohibition 2 — Violation of Prohibition 2 — Disclosure — Violation of Prohibition 1 — Villainy — Mediation — First Function of the Donor — Confrontation — Victory — Misfortune Resolved — Wedding Ceremony. *Maleficent* mainly contains 15 functions, arranged in the following order: Initial Situation — Prohibition 1 — Violation of Prohibition 1 — Trickery — Complicity — Villainy 1 — Lack — Prohibition 2 — Violation of Prohibition 2 — Villainy 2 — Misfortune Resolved — Lack Resolved — Confrontation — Victory — Return — Coronation Ceremony.

We find that most of the functions in the two films are the same; the pair of functions of prohibition and violation of prohibition both appear twice; the main functions such as villainy, confrontation, victory, lack resolved and coronation are the same and in the same order. However, despite the same functions of the main characters, the two films tell completely different stories.

3. Character Analysis in *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent*

Propp not only studied the various invariable functions of stories but also attached importance to the variable factors in stories and the connections between various functions. He believed that the variable items of stories are divided into two categories: one is the auxiliary factors that play a connecting role between functions, such as explaining the cause of the story and the transmission of information; the other is the names of characters and their symbols. The diversity of stories stems precisely from the multiple variable factors of stories. Below, we will analyze the main variable factors that affect the changes in the story of *Maleficent*.

3.1 Differences in Character Settings

The most distinctive feature of traditional fairy tales is the variety of ever-changing characters, yet these characters have formed fixed impressions in the development of fairy tales. For example, witches always represent darkness, princesses are always beautiful and kind, and princes are always brave. Propp summarized seven constant character roles in magical tales, including the hero, the villain (persecutor), the donor (provider), the helper, the princess (the sought-for person) and her father, the dispatcher, and the false hero. In the animated film *Sleeping Beauty*, the hero is the princess, the villain is the witch, and the providers and helpers are all the fairies; the entire story development is completely stylized with a fixed pattern.

Character roles and functions are both invariable factors, but the reason why stories are infinitely varied and rich and colorful is precisely due to the ever-changing variable factors. The stylized narrative methods and the black-and-white character personalities of traditional fairy tales are too simplistic for adults. Therefore, we find that in current Hollywood live-action films adapted from fairy tales, although the functional structure of the story remains basically unchanged, characters take on multiple roles, depicting the complexity of human nature in the adult world. In the live-action film *Maleficent*, the perspective shifts from the princess to the witch; the hero changes from the princess to the witch, and the witch here is both the helper and the villain. This subverts the relatively single impression and portrayal of characters in traditional fairy tales, making one character embody both positive and negative roles at the same time.

3.2 Differences in Character Motivation

Motivation is the reason and purpose for a character's actions; motivation often makes the story full of distinct and special colors, but motivation is the most unstable factor in the story. In most fairy tales, the motivation for most characters' actions is not clearly explained. For example, in *Sleeping Beauty*, the princess is kind and beautiful but is cursed by the witch; the story does not need to explain the witch's motivation for casting the curse. In children's stories, it seems that there is no need for specific explanation. However, in the live-action film *Maleficent*, the

motivation for all the protagonist's actions is clearly explained. For example, the protagonist was a kind and beautiful fairy when she was a child, but after being betrayed and hurt, she transformed from a kind fairy into an evil witch and cast a sleeping curse on the daughter of her persecutor. Here, her motivation for performing the villainy act is to take revenge on the king, and this narrative form conforms to the way adults understand things. Later, in the process of watching the little princess grow up, the witch regained her kindness and repeatedly helped the princess get out of danger. Because she developed affection for the princess, she wanted to help the princess lift the curse but was trapped and arrested by the king. At this time, although the princess was the victim of the villainy, she took the initiative to help the witch retrieve her wings because of the emotional bond between them, and finally escaped the trap. Subsequently, the witch did not want to kill the king, probably because she was kind by nature or because the king was the princess's father, but the king, consumed by hatred, refused to give up and eventually brought about his own destruction.

It should be noted here that although the film elaborates on the multi-faceted nature of the protagonist and portrays the character with rich and full personality, other roles still have a single dimension. For example, the princess is still kind and beautiful, and the king did not remain kind despite the witch's transformation.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the functional "invariable factors"—the core narrative frameworks, thematic cornerstones, and iconic plot anchors that define a classic fairy tale's identity—and "variable factors"—the flexible, adaptive elements such as character motivations, narrative perspectives, and contextual details—are ingeniously intertwined to construct a cohesive, emotionally resonant story. By conducting a comparative analysis of these two categories of factors in Disney's animated *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and its live-action reimagining *Maleficent* (2014), we can clearly discern that variable factors serve as the primary creative playground for film adaptations, allowing filmmakers to subvert conventional tropes, inject contemporary values, and breathe new life into time-honored tales. In fact, tracing the evolutionary trajectory from *Sleeping Beauty* to *Maleficent* reveals that adapters do not merely manipulate variable factors passively; they also exercise deliberate selectivity in the inheritance and reconstruction of functional elements—retaining the foundational conflict between the cursed princess and the enchantress, for instance, while discarding the one-dimensional moral dichotomy embedded in the original animation. Beyond the macro-level restructuring of plot and theme, bold re-creation can also be implemented in microcosmic aspects of storytelling, including the etymological connotations behind character naming (e.g., the symbolic weight of "Maleficent," derived from the Latin word for "harmful"), the multi-dimensional shaping of character images (transforming Maleficent from a flat villain into a tragic anti-heroine with a wounded past), and the strategic selection and setting of character traits (infusing Aurora with a curious, independent spirit that transcends the passive "damsel in distress" archetype). As a novel variant of traditional fairy tales, live-action fairy tale films have successfully expanded their target audience beyond the demographic of children to embrace adult viewers, a shift that necessitates a fundamental transformation of narrative perspective. Unlike animated adaptations that prioritize whimsicality and didactic simplicity, live-action reimaginings often adopt a more nuanced, psychologically layered lens, exploring complex themes such as betrayal, redemption, and the ambiguity of good and evil. Although these adaptations remain anchored within the same basic narrative structure of the original fairy tales, they ultimately present audiences with a refreshingly distinct interpretation—one that honors the cultural heritage of classic stories while resonating with the ethical and aesthetic sensibilities of modern society.

References:

[1] Propp, V. (n.d.). *Morphology of the Folktale*. pp. 17–20.

[2]Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the Folktale* (2nd ed.) (L. Scott, Trans.). Indiana University Press. p. 14.

[3]Berger, A. A. (1997). *Narratives in Popular Culture, Media, and Everyday Life* (Y. Yao, Trans.). Nanjing University Press. p. 28.