**Changing with the Times; Maleficent and Misunderstood Fairy Tale Villains**

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**Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) 3D Design, Modelmaking & Digital Art. It is entirely the author’s own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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**Abstract**

The goal of this thesis is to illustrate how over time, fairy tales have shown a big shift in the values and ideals held by society, which is exemplified and reflected by the changing attitudes towards their villains. Throughout history, villains in fairy tales have been largely regarded as one note characters who are simply evil because the story demands it, they served their purpose effectively and were well received by the audience of the time. This can often highlight the attitudes and values of the society in which the story was written. However, over any length of time society can change drastically and this again, can be represented by the attitude towards the villains in fairy tales. In order to stay relevant, fairy tales have to shift and change to stay in keeping with societal values and maintain their appeal. This is a testament as to how adaptable they are.

For the modern audience, a villain needs to have much more depth to them than the classic one note evil for the sake of evil trope. A modern villain needs to have much more humanity and layers, making them relatable, as the modern audience expresses a desire to understand their motives and methods. This is highlighted through the example of Maleficent and her transition from antagonist to protagonist, being given her own version of the classic Sleeping Beauty fairy tale. Within the context given to Maleficent and the series of events throughout her life, her actions become understandable as the lines between good and evil are blurred. She is transformed from classic evil witch to a misunderstood tragic hero. This transformation has proven popular with the modern audience and has shown potential for other classic fairy tale villains to be given the same treatment. Furthermore, looking back at separate villains with this lens, there are sympathetic aspects that would portray them as simply misunderstood.

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**Introduction**

The exploration of fairy tale villains in this thesis delves into their timeless portrayals, themes, and evolution from original fairy tale books to their modern day interpretations. The primary source for this dissertation is the brothers Grimm fairy tales, with additional references to the works of Charles Perrault and Hans Christian Andersen. Fairy tales are something that have remained relevant to society over hundreds of years and have always consisted of a hero and a villain. Over time, many stories have undergone drastic changes in their narratives to reflect the context and social values of the time period. However, the villain has typically stayed the same, never shifting from the evil and malicious portrayal that is presented, until now.

Recently there has been a shift in the audience’s desire to see more complex, morally grey, and ambiguous characters. Where better to explore this concept than classic fairy tale villains? With a shift in perspective, these villains are interpreted as misunderstood characters with human reasoning behind their questionable actions rather than villains who are truly evil at heart. A prime example of a villain experiencing this shift in perspective is Maleficent from the classic fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*. The film *Maleficent* (2014) in which Maleficent herself is the protagonist and the classic story of *Sleeping Beauty* is told from her viewpoint, giving the audience a glimpse into her backstory and an opportunity to sympathise with her, and further identifying her as a misunderstood villain.

With a contemporary audience, fairy tales have reflected the shifts in societal values, expectations, and the transformation of characters, particularly villains, in response to changing perspectives. With the shifts and advancements in technology, there have been significant changes in the ways in which fairy tales are told. The mediums have changed from the oral and written word into the world of visual media, which provide new opportunities for exploring these narratives from a fresh perspective. The overarching theme is the adaptability of fairy tales, acting as mirrors reflecting on society and the context of different time periods.

Chapter one begins by exploring the original brothers Grimm fairytalebook and their modern cinematic adaptations. By comparing the state of the stories in both time periods it becomes evident to see what the audience at the time valued and what themes were important to address. The contrast serves as a stepping stone in discovering and revealing how these narratives have adapted to societal shifts while retaining their core values. Examples of stories that can be compared through time are *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*. The fact that comparisons in these stories can be made between now and hundreds of years ago, highlights the importance of fairy tales and their significance in society. It can be considered difficult to think of a famous story familiar to both children and adults worldwide that is not in some way based on a fairy tale. The core message and themes of these stories have stood the test of time. Even with different interpretations the general narrative still accomplishes the same goal that the original plot set out to do.

One of the most significant shifts in contemporary society that is reflected in the retellings of fairy tales is the emergence of feminism. Audiences have seen a drastic change in the portrayal of female characters in fairy tales, giving them more authority and presence within the stories while still relating the same message as the original. Within this chapter, the roots of these stories are laid bare, paying attention to their origins and the context which surrounds them. From character dynamics to storytelling mediums, the chapter delves into the difference between old and new, offering a closer look into societal values and attitudes that have ripened with time.

Further exploration continues in the second chapter, focusing on the misunderstood nature of fairy tale villains, best displayed by *Sleeping Beauty’s* evil queen, Maleficent. This section delves deeper into the shifting perspectives on villainous characters, their significance and tracing their evolution from one dimensional representations of evil to complex, empathetic figures. As mentioned, fairy tales change with their audience, which is now at a point where there is a desire to have more insight into these villainous characters. A greater understanding of their motivations and actions can reveal just as much humanity as looking into those of the hero, given the right context and perspective they can become easier to sympathise with.

This chapter seeks to look at multiple fairy tale villains that have typically been presented as very one dimensional characters in their villainy and seek to understand them more. This can be done by examining their contemporary portrayals and exploring their actions with an empathic perspective, looking at what happens to them, what drives them to oppose the hero and what motivates their seemingly malicious goals. Examples of villains that will be covered include Maleficent of *Sleeping Beauty*, Captain Hook of *Peter Pan* and Ursula of *The Little Mermaid*. The spotlight rests on Maleficent's transformation, from a malicious force in the original *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) to a tragic hero in *Maleficent* (2014) which is an adaptation of the original 1959 film. The chapter investigates how storytelling techniques, especially in film, can reshape perceptions, bringing new life to characters once confined to a purely villainous mould.

Chapter three will focus on the status of the modern audience, what it means for fairy tales in a contemporary narrative and how it will affect them going forward. Through Maleficent and her own perspective in the Sleeping Beauty classic story, it has paved the way for more classic villains to be given protagonist status, where they are made to be the hero of their own story. Such is also the case with Cruella De Ville being the protagonist of her story in the 2021 film *Cruella*. There is an active relationship between the modern audience and fairy tales on a scale never seen before.

The contemporary audience has changed so much over time, it can be argued that the most significant changes that have ever been made to fairy tales are being made now to reflect the new values of a modern society. A key element of this is how the modern audience views women and their status in these stories. There has been a growing awareness of the role women played in the classic fairy tales, and how they were relegated to mere stereotypes like the damsel in distress, the evil witch, or the evil stepmother. The modern audience looks for and appreciates female characters that break through these stereotypes and have more complex layers and diversity. The stereotypes even extend towards the gender of a villain. The chapter will discuss the male vs female dynamic in fairy tales and show how contemporary retellings have broken away from these antiquated generalisations. It serves to highlight how fairy tales have changed and shifted over time alongside the values of society.

Drawing these points together, they serve to effectively explore how the idea of the misunderstood villain can be applied to fairy tales both old and new. From this there are implications of further significance and relevance that fairy tales currently hold and have always held within society. The contemporary shift in how villains are portrayed in these stories can tell a lot about where we are and where we have come from in our societal values and ideals. The contemporary audience, influenced by societal changes such as the rise of feminism, actively engages with fairy tales, commencing a re-evaluation of gender dynamics and a more realistic portrayal of characters. As classic villains are reimagined as the hero, there is a clear shift in the narrative’s perspective, reflecting the values of today’s society. This exploration underlines the constant relevance and adaptability that fairy tales hold, serving as a mirror to forever evolving societal values and securing their relevancy for generations to come.

In summary, this thesis delves into the evolution of fairy tale villains, examining their transition from one dimensional representations of evil to complex, nuanced characters. By investigating examples of misunderstood villains such as the character Maleficent in the tale of *Sleeping Beauty* and by analysing a variety of fairy tale adaptations, the research highlights the transformative power of storytelling techniques, especially in film.Top of Form

Chapter 1

***Fairy Tales, The Old and New***

This chapter will focus on the comparison of fairy tales from the original brothers Grimm fairy tales,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the tales of Hans Christian Andersen,[[2]](#footnote-2) to their modern day adaptations particularly in film. The purpose of this is to provide a greater understanding of how fairy tales have changed over the years reflecting society while keeping some core elements the same. To facilitate this understanding in an effective way, it is necessary to analyse the contrast between past and present fairy tales. Key aspects to examine in fairy tales, old and new is their length, mediums, target audience and narratives. There is a vast array of fairy tales that could be used as examples, however, the stories that effectively convey the idea explored in this chapter are *Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty*[[3]](#footnote-3)and *The Little Mermaid.*[[4]](#footnote-4)Andrew Teverson, a professor of English is a key theorist for this chapter and his work will be referenced in relation to the core argument. Fairy tales are still commonplace today, and it is necessary to gain a greater understanding as to why they have not simply faded into obscurity and the past. In turn, this understanding will provide a stepping stone into looking at how the villains in these stories can be viewed as simply misunderstood rather than the figures of pure evil they are presented to be on the surface.

It is important to note that these modern adaptations are not retellings verbatim, but adaptations that can both add and take away form the original tales. Professor of English and Folklore Cristina Bacchilega lays out a definition of an adaptation by saying “Adaptations are not simply influenced by their pre-texts, but reflect back on them, whether we are familiar or not with every specific pre-text, and intervening on our earlier readings of them, and of other related texts.”[[5]](#footnote-5)From this it can be said that an adaptation in this context is the process of changing the original fairy tale to a more widely accepted narrative to suit todays society. A brief synopsis of the origin of the fairy tales will also be discussed further and by providing the origin of these tales it will give the reader a better understanding of the stories that will be referenced in future chapters. By doing this there will be clear differences between the old and the new, which will furthermore give us insight into how audiences, social values and attitudes have changed since the original fairy tales became popular. From this the importance of fairy tales can be seen since they have been around and maintained their relevancy for so long and show no signs of fading away any time soon.

Most of the well known and loved fairy tales of present day are interpretations of the brothers Grimm fairy tale book.[[6]](#footnote-6) Some of these fairy tales include; *Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Rapunzel* and many more. Literary scholar and folklorist Ruth Bottigheimer argues that the *brothers Grimm Fairytales* are the first point in which we can begin to see moral values and life lessons being taught through storytelling, an example of this being *Little* *Red Cap* also known as *Little Red Riding Hood*. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm’s story teaches children not to stray from the path and preaches the “stranger danger” life lesson.[[7]](#footnote-7) Some of the biggest changes in how the stories are told is the sanitisation of the stories through the reduction of violence, tragedy, and punishment for wrongdoing. In doing so, the stories have been shaped into the familiar “happily ever after” mould which modern audiences so desire.

Another difference seen in modern interpretations is the story length and detail, Grimm stories were shorter only being a few pages long for each story and focused less on character development. *Sleeping Beauty*, which was originally named *Briar-Rose* is three pages long, *Cinderella* is eight pages long and finally *Little Red Riding Hood* also originally known as *Little Red Cap* is four pages long.[[8]](#footnote-8) In having such short texts there was no time given for character development, the story is merely stated as it is, as it happened in this world of fiction the Grimm brothers have created. Contemporary interpretations provide us with more depth, complexity and focus on expanding their characters, this shift in focus is a contributing factor to the longer stories we see today.

A change in media format is another reason for the increased length of these stories, in modern day we often see these classic stories told in the format of film and television, which is conductive to this longer format. Most modern film adaptations are between ninety and one hundred and twenty minutes long, this is a vast difference in comparison to reading three or six pages of text. With this added length and visual stimulus of film it grants the audience more time with the characters thus giving them the time to understand their story and narrative.

The most famous fairy tales of today come from the brothers Grimm tales first published in the 19th century by brothers Jacob and Willhelm Grimm.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Grimm brothers travelled Germany collecting folk stories which had, in many cases, been passed down from generations orally. The brothers sourced these stories from various people, all from vastly different, colourful backgrounds. The tales reflect the context of their time, illustrating female characters and their role in society. Women in these tales are often seen to be in need of rescue by a male character and typically remain a passive factor in the narrative. Examples include, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, where a woman needs a prince to save her from a death like sleep and the key purpose of her life is the pursuit of romance.

In contrast to these tales, contemporary interpretations depict their female characters as more independent and empowered, as seen in the film *Tangled* (2010)[[10]](#footnote-10) an adaptation of the original fairy tale *Rapunzel* by the brothers Grimm.[[11]](#footnote-11) The character of Rapunzel in *Tangled* develops into a strong, courageous, and brave figure by leaving her tower in the pursuit of happiness and retaliates against her captor, mother Gothel. This is a notable change in her character development, in comparison to the original tale. By looking at the state of these stories now, we can see a reflection of how the position of women has drastically changed since their original publication.

By looking at the context of each story, the state of society at the time of its conception is a valuable factor to consider. By comparing them with their current interpretations, contrast can be seen between the then and now. However, with many of these contemporary reimagining’s, the general message of the story has stayed relatively the same showing some parts of society and its values may not have changed as much as it may seem. For example, *The Little Mermaid,* both the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale,[[12]](#footnote-12) and the Disney film adaptation (1989).[[13]](#footnote-13) Both tales hold the same core of the story, in which a mermaid saves a prince from a sinking ship and gives up her voice in exchange for a pair of legs, so that she can live on land and be with the prince. Both the original story and the film adaptation explores the idea of sacrificial love, how sacrifice is sometimes necessary to achieve a “happy ever after”.

A starting point from where a shift can be seen in fairy tale storytelling is the mid 20th century. During this time there were changes to societal values and perspectives including the emergence of feminism, diversity, and cultural awareness. During this time scholars began to examine how fairy tales portrayed female characters. This led to adaptations in which female characters were independent and empowered in their story. For example, in the original brothers Grimm *Cinderella*,[[14]](#footnote-14) the stepmother of Cinderella was still married to Cinderella’s father. In the Disney adaptation of *Cinderella* (1950)[[15]](#footnote-15) she was widowed and is now in a position of power. This era was a turning point for fairy tales, where the storytelling began to align with the values that would be held by a changed audience. Fairy tales have continued to evolve ever since, constantly being reimagined in response to shifts in our societal values. In this, fairy tales offer a view into culture at the time of their creation, from which we can reflect on how we have adapted themes and ideas around our ever changing values in civilisation.

Fairy tales often explore themes that remain relevant to people across time. Themes such as good versus evil, love and courage are all timeless and relatable concepts. Fairy tales were often used to convey moral lessons which remain important regardless of the time period, making these stories valuable tools for teaching and guiding, especially for children. A prime example being Charles Perrault’s *Little Red Riding Hood*,[[16]](#footnote-16) this tale preaches the “stranger danger” life lesson and teaches children to never stray from the path. While stories like these on their own can remain relevant, their adaptability allows them to be reworked in alignment with societal values while the moral lesson remains the same. Modern adaptations use this to their advantage to integrate contemporary issues into their stories, which helps to maintain relevancy.

It can be argued that the adaptability is a key reason as to why theses stories have stood the test of time for so long. They are malleable and can change in the eyes of the storyteller to adapt to a new audience conveying different themes while keeping the core of the story the same. Professor of English Andrew Teverson argues that “Fairy tales, because they speak in an apparently symbolic language, because they are thought to be ancient, because they are iconic, because they are communal, because they are part of our collective consciousness, invite interpretation.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This can show that because fairy tales are part of the collective consciousness of society, meaning we all are aware of these stories, the relatability of these stories leads to a much easier method for conveying a particular message.

Teverson goes on to describe different variations of the story of *Little* *Red Riding Hood*, one where the girl and the grandmother are eaten by the wolf at the end, one where they are rescued by a woodsman and one where the girl outsmarts the wolf.[[18]](#footnote-18) It would be fair to assume that many people have heard of these variations in some form or another, each ending in a suitable conclusion for a different audience and ultimately conveying a different message. The Grimm’s ending,[[19]](#footnote-19) where they are rescued by the huntsman provided the most happily ever after, although the story ends with the little girl filling the wolfs stomach with stones which slowly killed him is still a morbid ending, the bigger picture is that the innocent little girl and her grandmother survived, and the almighty big bad wolf dies. On the other hand, Charles Perrault’s version,[[20]](#footnote-20) offers the most melancholic of them all meeting a grisly end of which the wolf eats the little girl and her grandmother, and they were not saved by the huntsman. The tale of *Little Red Riding Hood* has accumulated many alternative endings over the years, yet the originals of the Grimm brothers and Charles Perrault are the most morbid. Each time the story stayed relatively the same only to significantly change the ending, keeping the story itself relevant while changing part of the message for the audience and context of the time.

Teverson goes on to say that “This kaleidoscope of interpretations tells us several things about the fairy tale: it tells us that the fairy tale has the quality of plurisigniﬁcation: that it is rich in potential meanings, and can take on diverse signiﬁcances depending on how it is being used and by whom.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Teverson’s utilization of terms such as “plurisignification” emphasises that he understands that fairy tales and their stories can capture multiple meanings at the same time, whether it is a story of love and revenge or loss and discovery. This shows that fairy tales have a massive amount of potential for storytelling and adaptability, whether it be entertainment, teaching different lessons or capturing the values and context of the time period, and in turn shows why they have stayed relevant for so long.

A key aspect of storytelling is that of the relationship between characters and how they interact with each other, the most important being the hero and villain dynamic. Typically, it can be said that the hero is the most respected character of a story, but without a villain, fairy tales would be mundane, with the protagonist facing little adversity. Villains bring conflict and tension to the story, which in turn captivates the audience. The foundation of a fairy tale is often the battle of good versus evil, the protagonist versus the villain. Villains are also used as a device to convey moral lessons, as the audience sees the contrast between the protagonist and the villain, and the consequences for the immoral decisions of the villain. The triumph of the protagonist over the villain is another device used to provide the audience with a feeling of resolution and oftentimes justice. The simplest contribution a villain makes to a fairy tale is entertainment. They create a feeling of uncertainty and adventure that draws in the audience.

Villains can be argued to be of vital importance for any plot. For there to be conflict there needs to be two opposing forces each setting out to achieve a goal that directly impacts the other, a protagonist and an antagonist. In this particular case of fairy tales, protagonist being the hero and an antagonist being a villain. A villain may seek to oppose the protagonist for vastly different reasons, and a traditional villain would do it for universally agreed upon evil reasons and carry out evil acts. An antagonist does not necessarily have to be evil, as we can see in many contemporary stories nowadays, examples being Maleficent or Captain Hook. However, antagonists in a traditional fairy tale scenario would always commit acts of evil and villainy. It can be argued that these acts come from a sadistic place within the villain. When they perform cruel acts upon the hero and other innocent characters, they would typically do it because they take pleasure in their suffering. A useful example being that of Maleficent in the original *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).[[22]](#footnote-22) Without the context given by her current retelling, she is presented as pure evil in the original story implementing suffering on the good characters purely for her own satisfaction.

Film theorist and filmmaker Laura Mulvey exclaims that “sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and end.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Sadistic villains can be seen primarily in early 19th century storytelling, these villains took pleasure in inflicting sadness or pain amongst the innocent, however in more recent retellings these villains, in most cases inflict pain to get revenge. Villains help drive the conflict that makes up the plot and gives the audience more reason to root for them. They can help reinforce the message and good natured themes of the hero on how to be someone to root for. Nowadays, although villains are presented in a different way, with more character development and insight, the sadistic aspects have been buried under sympathetic layers. However, they are still there, and one only needs to look at their actions, sympathetic or not, to see that this sadistic nature still helps drive the story.

Drawing together the points made, it is easy to identify the clear differences between the old and the new. Fairy tales can serve as time capsules where they reflect the views and values of society during the time they were written. However, the messages and themes of these stories are easily applicable to any time period which makes them constantly relevant. Since the values of an audience are always shifting as time goes on, many distinct aspects of fairy tales need to adapt and change in order to keep their message significant. This extends to their narrative structure, length, medium or character and in this case, more importantly, their villains. The classic villains of these stories, while being a constant element have been given a drastically different level of attention compared to their previous iterations. It is clear to see from this discussion that modern day adaptations have made the audience rethink how they perceive the original fairy tale villains and persuade the audience to consider that they are indeed misunderstood characters.

Chapter 2

***The Misunderstood Villain, Maleficent***

This chapter examines in further detail how fairy tale villains can be misunderstood. Firstly, it is essential to understand the importance of a villainous role within a fairy tale. Villains are just as important and interesting as heroes. A prime example of a villain well worth exploring is Maleficent and the transformation of her character that has developed over time. Other examples extend to Captain Hook and Ursula. With Maleficent it is noteworthy to observe her physical appearance, her presentation, the shift in perspective within the story line and the attention to detail given in expanding her as a character. The story of Maleficent has proved popular with the modern audience, and it is worth considering the opportunities this now opens for other classic villains to have their own story told.

A typical protagonist in a fairy tale is conventionally someone who is presented as an ideological hero. They usually possess traits such as being good natured, kind, or courageous. In contrast, the villain is usually portrayed to be the antithesis to the protagonist, being selfish, vengeful, or cruel. However, these too are human traits, and one can argue that given the right context or perspective, they can be entirely justified. It can be argued that the hero is the character that achieves their goals in the end at the expense of the villain, who does not.[[24]](#footnote-24) This chapter explores the idea that the perspective from which a story is told is largely influential in determining who the villain of a story is, making the narrator a crucial part of the story and how it influences the audiences thinking. A typical fairy tale would not exist without a heroic role and a villainous role conflicting with each other in their goals. These characters are pivotal in the narrative and considering their dynamic is imperative to understanding their characters. This segment will delve into the original tale of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)[[25]](#footnote-25) and the live action *Maleficent* (2014),[[26]](#footnote-26) using this story as a prime example of a villain being misunderstood.

In nearly all fairy tales throughout history there has been conflict within the narrative, and that conflict cannot be present without a villainous role. Without the villain to oppose the hero of the story there would be no narrative, no theme, and no message to learn from. It is worth considering what would happen in Peter Pan had there been no Captain Hook? Would Ariel have ever lived happily ever after with prince Eric if Ursula had not made the deal for her voice? Would Snow White have ever met the Seven Dwarves without the Evil Queen? The questions could cover many other famous stories. Over time, both audiences and writers have paid more attention to the villainous role, making the concept much less black and white, and rather more grey.

A greatly misunderstood villain in a well known fairy tale is Captain Hook from the story of *Peter and Wendy*, also known as *Peter Pan* in later adaptations. This story comes from the book *The Little White Bird* by J. M. Barrie (1902).[[27]](#footnote-27) Hook is portrayed as the villain in this story, however later adaptations such as Disney’s *Peter Pan* (1953)[[28]](#footnote-28) have given us a more nuanced portrayal of the character and his motivations. A critical assessment of Hook shows he is deeply insecure about aging and in constant fear of the crocodile that follows him. This fear was caused by Peter, he cut off Hooks hand and fed it to the crocodile. The very same beast also swallowed a clock afterwards, making the haunting ticking sound of the clock one of his few fears, a reminder of his trauma and of his time left to live, his aging and his death.[[29]](#footnote-29) This fear of death and aging is a highly relatable topic and when given consideration makes him a more relatable character who we can sympathise with.

Another misunderstood villain is the sea witch in Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid*.[[30]](#footnote-30) Known as Ursula in later adaptations, this character is misunderstood for a number of reasons. The sea witch is portrayed as an outcast, banished and exiled by the king, Ariels father. Ursula’s actions are seen to be motivated by survival rather than pure malevolence. She uses her magical powers to make deals with mermaids, showing that she is resourceful and pragmatic. While the deal the sea witch makes with Ariel could be seen as unreasonable, she clearly explains the terms to Ariel and the potential consequences. Ariel stands to benefit greatly from their deal, so it is only fair to expect an equal level of risk in the consequences. While making this deal with Ariel could be seen as morally questionable, she was given autonomy to make it anyway, which is more than her father ever did for her and labelling the sea witch as a villain because of this is unfair.

Moving on to the story of *Sleeping Beauty* originally named *Briar-Rose*, the character of Maleficent provides a rich canvas for further storytelling. Her character is ripe for further development outside of her original portrayal in *Sleeping Beauty*. Of all recent fairy tale adaptations, she has been consistently in the spotlight more so than any other fairy tale villain having two mainstream films where she is the focus of the narrative. Svea Hundertmark, a researcher in English literature states that Maleficent does not merely fulfil the task to set the action in motion, but she is entitled to her own story. [[31]](#footnote-31) Her story has been delved into deeper and deeper, therefore expanded upon to drastically change the perception of the character in comparison to her debut. Maleficent is a memorable villain, in both her striking appearance and her strong willed personality.

Before the latest adaption which focuses on her, her backstory was mysterious and was a candidate for deeper exploration. The story of Maleficent presented an opportunity to explore and challenge the idea of good versus evil. Overall, her character was an ideal candidate due to her storytelling potential and audience appeal. The live action film *Maleficent* (2014),[[32]](#footnote-32) changes the storytelling perspective from the original point of view of Aurora in Sleeping Beauty. This changes the story in a number of ways. One of the biggest differences in this later adaptation is that it explores Maleficent’s backstory. She is a fairy who is betrayed by her childhood friend Stefan who steals her wings in order to become the new king. This is the catalyst for her transformation into the character we know from the original. This new perspective challenges the view of Maleficent being evil, presenting her as a character who has lost and has been betrayed.

Ultimately Maleficent is turned from villain to a tragic hero. “Aristotle described tragic hero as someone who, although is of noble position embodies virtues and has good intentions, is marked by a fatal fall or provokes tragedy by some error of judgement. Tragic hero’s, therefore, are at least partially responsible for what happens to them, but who’s punishment is not proportional to the crime he committed.”[[33]](#footnote-33) From this it can be said that a fatal fall is the moment or event that turns a character into a villain, a catalyst that makes a change in a character’s behaviour go from good to bad. With the case of maleficent, her fatal fall is when her trust is betrayed, and she commences down a path motivated by vengeance. This path leads to resentment and contempt towards her from the common folk and furthermore escalates into an all out war between her kingdom and theirs. She is initially full of good natured intentions but her willingness to trust easily is partially responsible for her downfall.

Maleficent is presented as an independent and powerful character driven by vengeance. This adaptation explores her path from vengeance to understanding and forgiveness. Her character is given the space and opportunity in the story for growth. This opportunity is rarely given to fairy tale villains, and a new approach to Maleficent allows for a nuanced look at good vs evil and how it is not black and white. It challenges the idea that individuals are either good or evil, they are instead complex and can have elements of both sides.

A cartoon character of a person

Description automatically generatedA person in a garment

Description automatically generated

*Figure 1: Sleeping Beauty 1959 Figure 2: Maleficent 2014 – After betrayal.*

*A person in a garment

Description automatically generated*

*Figure 3: Maleficent 2014 – before betrayal*

In the 2014 adaptation,[[34]](#footnote-34) Maleficent’s character has changed visually in a number of ways (See Figure 2). This is a technique used to change how the audience views her character. Enrique Camara Arenes talks about how “The function of appearance in villainy begins with identification and when it reaches much further” he goes on to say that “We only need to take a quick look at the external features of a villain in order to categorise them as the baddies, and associate them instantly to a number of ominous personality traits.”[[35]](#footnote-35) In this it is simply recognised that appearance plays a vital part in establishing characters personality, especially villains. For audiences, this leads to them making a snap judgement and automatically assuming who the villain is based on how they are presented physically, whether it is wearing dark clothing, having a monstrous look, sharp features, or scars. In the case of Maleficent this has changed from her original portrayal to show that the audience will be seeing her in a different light in comparison to how she was represented in the past. With her contemporary presentation, her attire has changed, with more intricacy and texture reflecting the new depth to her story. Her costume appears to be more battle-ready, reflecting her strength.



Figure 4: The moors – *Maleficent* 2014

Another substantial difference in her appearance is the tone of her skin. In the original animated version, she is portrayed with a green completion, commonly used for villains in Disney adaptations (See Figure 1). In the 2014 live action adaption she has a natural complexion, this humanises and makes her appear less monstrous. Another visual difference in this new adaptation is the presence of her wings (See Figure 3). These wings are visually imposing and a vital part of her characters story. They serve as a representation of her independence and strength. Subtle imperfections such as scars are some other important additions to her character which not only adds to the humanisation of her character but also emphasise there is much more to her story than we have previously seen. Before her betrayal by king Stefan, Maleficent’s physical appearance is much more neutral and conveys a character who is of good nature. Her clothes are reflective of the moors, the place in which she lives (See Figure 4), being made of organic materials, and coloured in earthy tones like browns and greens. She is one with nature and the environment, which connotates purity and kindness.

The exposure of her hair symbolises her humanity. However, once her betrayal occurs, her clothing changes into something else entirely seeming more ominous and imbued with malice, reflecting her change in character. Furthermore, her hair has been covered removing the last semblance of humanity she possesses, making her look more monstrous, emphasising her horns. Her outfit is now entirely black and has a large collar as if to symbolise her character reverting back to the evil nature she had in her previous representation of the story. (See Figure 1) Given this connection it may help the audience see this version of her character in the Disney story in a different light, as the audience are now able to look past and understand her outwardly villainous look, visualise how she got there and what her nature was before the story began.

In the 2014 adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty*, Maleficent boldly demonstrated the potential of exploring classic fairy tale villains from a new perspective. It serves as an example of how compelling storytelling can be derived from these misunderstood characters. It is an opportunity to see these characters as human, with vulnerabilities and often justified grievances and reasons for revenge. This new approach challenges the often one-dimensional approach we have seen in the past when it comes to villains.

*Maleficent* (2014) has a strong emphasis on female characters and their empowerment. This feminist perspective could be used in future adaptations of other fairy tales where women were previously repressed and overlooked in the narrative due to the societal context of the times they were written. Since the 2014 release, Disney has released new interpretations of their original fairy tales in which other villains have received similar focus, such as *Cruella* (2021)[[36]](#footnote-36) and *The Little Mermaid* (2023).[[37]](#footnote-37) In conclusion, the 2014 film has paved the way for future fairy tale adaptations, providing a strong and lasting impact on the world of fairy tales and villains.

From all the points considered it is clear that classifying the characters of Maleficent, Captain Hook and Ursula as villains is no longer a straightforward task. Putting a spotlight on Maleficent and her original portrayal provides sparce information on her motivations, leaving the audience with little to no basis for understanding her character. However, the modern adaptations offer crucial context and backstory, revealing that Maleficent is profoundly misunderstood by both characters in the story and the audience. Visual representation also plays an essential role in identifying characters. With Maleficent, visual changes such as alterations to her attire, introducing earthy tones and a natural complexion, humanise her character, thus breaking away from stereotypical villain portrayals. This shift in her portrayal is driven by the contemporary audience’s desire for more complex and relatable characters, ultimately blurring the lines between heroes and villains. Together, these perspectives underline the evolving nature of storytelling and the nuanced exploration of characters that challenge simplistic classifications.

Chapter 3

***Fairy Tales and The Modern Audience***

This chapter examines the relationship between modern audiences and modern interpretations of classic fairy tales. The attitudes and values of audience’s have undergone serious changes since the time these tales were first recorded, the way in which these stories are told currently and the themes they address have changed in tandem to reflect that. Both sides have been transformed over the years and this chapter delves into how the changes have been reactive to each other. Furthermore, it is crucial to look at the modern audience’s perception of female villains and women in positions of power, how it is different from a male villain, and how it impacts the story. Authors such as Sigrid Bauner and Marina Tatar cover the significant differences between the presentation of male and female roles in fairy tales and their findings are significantly relevant to this chapter.By looking through a contemporary lens the stereotypes women held in the original versions of the stories can be used to reflect on how these roles have changed to suit the modern audience.

Since the time of the Grimm’s fairy tale stories,[[38]](#footnote-38) society has undergone a vast number of changes in what audience’s value and how they treat each other. Of course, in order to stay relevant, fairy tales have had to change and adapt themselves and reflect these contemporary values. Whether it be changing the setting or aesthetic of the story or altering a character’s motivations, the story and themes stay relatively the same but are now much more relatable to the value of a modern audience. If one was to look at the popularity of reimagined versions of the original stories it clearly shows, there is an appetite for these stories to be altered. The modern audience has an appetite for more complex and morally grey characters, since most contemporary media features narratives told around such things. The morally grey characters, furthermore, extends to villains.

This current audience would be far more interested in seeing a villain’s motivations as more human than being simply pure evil with little to no explanation, or seeing female roles break away from their archaic stereotypes. This is clearly something that modern audiences want to see, as *Maleficent* was a huge commercial success taking in 240,000,000 dollars across the US and Canada and 750,000,000 dollars worldwide.[[39]](#footnote-39) This success then lead to a sequel, *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019).[[40]](#footnote-40) Furthermore, along with the change in society since the time of the brothers Grimm fairy tales, there has been monumental change in technology and in turn, storytelling mediums.

The original fairy tales emerged in a time where the skills of reading and writing were few and far between, and therefore passed down through generations orally. A disadvantage with this method was that it would be quite easy for aspects of the story to change due to human error. However, this could be countered over time as when said skills became more commonplace, the stories could be recorded in a much more concrete and definitive fashion. Now, with cinema and visual media, it adds huge potential to how these stories are told. The modern audience can experience fairy tales through visual representation, adding many more layers to the representation of the story. A further benefit of visual media is newfound length and depth.

With a character like Maleficent, the medium of cinema can do so much more for her story than that of the original written fairy tale of *Sleeping Beauty*. As previously discussed, it is important to note how the film depicts her visually and what that does for her character, but it is worth noting how much story a film can pack in over the course of its run time. The film not only maintains the general story of Sleeping Beauty but manages to shift the perspective, provide insight, and give much more depth and humanity to the character of Maleficent. It can argued that if the film were to simply retell the classic story verbatim, a modern audience would lose interest as it could be wasted potential in how much a film could and does add to the tale.

Laura Mulvey argues that in early Hollywood cinema films were made with the male gaze at the forefront of its target audience. Roles were split between active for males and passive for females.[[41]](#footnote-41) In early storytelling, men can be seen as figures of action, putting the story in motion, Women in contrast to this can be seen as bystanders or objects that leave all the action to men. Mulvey adds to this idea by stating that women on screen served no other purpose than to be an object for the male gaze. “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connotate ‘*to-be-looked-at-ness’ .*”[[42]](#footnote-42) With this in mind, the characters Maleficent and Cruella could both equally serve as examples of how contemporary films have steered away from this mindset. Each film portrays an active female lead with no connotation of any ‘looked-at-ness’, where women were assigned as sexual objects in Hollywood’s visual theatre.

Going a step further these are female characters who have been historically portrayed as villains and enemies of the male gaze, now being represented with more contemporary values. With the male gaze in mind, it is important to note that all of the original fairy tales previously discussed were all written by men, that of the Grimm brothers, Charles Perrault and Hans Christian Andersen, therefore making them the deciders of who the villains were in their stories. This is a vital aspect when considering the villains were largely female.

Taking a glance at fairy tales in general over the years, one could notice the vast differences between male and female villains that relate to either presentation or motivation. Male villains have generally sought to carry out their motivations through violence, such as Captain Hook wanting to fight and kill Peter Pan for revenge. Going a step further they sometimes present themselves and are presented by the narrative as exceedingly cocky with an exaggerated self absorbed swagger such as Gaston from *Beauty and The Beast* (1991).[[43]](#footnote-43) However, female villains are shown to be something else entirely. They are seen to achieve their goals through magic, cunning and manipulation, motivated by social anxieties and the desire to be beautiful. With *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937),[[44]](#footnote-44) the Evil Queen wishes to be ‘the fairest of them all’ and in *Cinderella* (1950)[[45]](#footnote-45) the Evil Stepmother wants her biological daughters to marry well and live comfortably.

A vast majority of the Grimm female fairy tale villains can be seen as evil stepmothers. Professor of literature Maria Tatar explains that the Grimms stepmothers do not pursue their stepsons but their stepdaughters, who consequently take on the role of innocent maidens and patient sufferers. Tatar also goes on to say that stepmothers may not be literal witches, but they subsequently possess similar traits to witches by subtracting their magical aspect.[[46]](#footnote-46) Ultimately, these villains use their power and positions of power to manipulate and control those around them into some form of subservience. Whether it is social or magical power, these villainous women use it to reinforce their will upon others who hold less power. This depiction of women who abuse their power reveals a fundamental fear of female power within nineteenth century society.[[47]](#footnote-47) Maleficent falls victim to this generalisation with her portrayal in the original story, however with her modern interpretation, she breaks through and many more layers are added to her character as a villain. She no longer comes across as an evil witch, which is a role seemingly reserved for a large number of female villains over the course of fairy tale history.

The concept of the witch is commonly found in fairy tales. It could be argued that a witch is something that would spring to mind at the mere mention of a fairy tale. This is no coincidence given the fact that during the time when many of these stories first appeared the world was far more convinced of the possibility of witches and lived in fear of them, thus making them ideal villains for their stories. However, it is now known that the idea of a witch was grown of the fear of women breaking away from their traditional roles in society.

The women most commonly accused of being witches were the ones who were attempting to break out of the role that society had assigned to them. They could do this either by owning businesses without the supervision of a husband, being unmarried and living alone, or simply giving an opinion on non-domestic issues more frequently than was seen appropriate. By doing this, these women were not only labelled as witches, but also as outcasts. They were often cast aside and became homeless or poor as a result of societal shame.[[48]](#footnote-48) By showing empathy for these poor unfortunate outcasts, one can look back on fairy tale witches and interpret their goals and motivations in a different way. With Maleficent, she no longer is an evil witch seeking to bring suffering to the kingdom for evil’s sake. She has a human reaction to her betrayal and seeks justice in the only way she knows how, and even forms a caring bond with princess Aurora eventually showing regret for her initial actions. This side to her character is completely ignored and she is simply labelled as a witch.

A notable change largely seen in villains with contemporary media is the shift from clear black and white good versus evil to morality that is akin to shades of grey. With some stories the hero could be committing acts just as bad as those of the villain. Arenes argues that “certainly, the reader is always embedded in a culture, and we can expect that, within the same culture, on readers experience of a character be similar in many respects to another’s.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Some readers could look upon a villainous character with the context of a culture different to that of the hero. In turn, they could view the villain in a completely different way to how they are presented. They could even go so far as to view the presented hero as a villain, given that the hero is sometimes carrying out questionable actions just like the presented villain. Many modern stories and retellings can be argued to have this in mind when presenting us with their heroes and villains. This is something that modern audiences have become much more aware of and engaged in. It could be argued that this is why much more villainous and morally ambiguous characters can be seen as protagonists. This has given rise to the anti-hero, a hero that the audience roots for even though they have the potential to do evil acts.

A common characteristic of the anti-hero is redemption, where they can be seen ultimately do good by the conclusion of the story. Many traditional villains are being changed into antiheroes in contemporary retellings through the introduction of new character traits or tweaking of old ones, or a shift in narrative elements. This is all so that the traditional villain is now seen as cinematic anti-hero and there is justification for their actions to be found in how they are now presented and with more context surrounding their character. Ultimately this can lead them on a journey of redemption despite being in an antagonistic role.[[50]](#footnote-50)This is something that can be found with Maleficent and the modern retelling of the fairy tale villain. Maleficent has been turned from a villain of pure evil with no irredeemable qualities into an antihero who commits evil acts justifiably and the audience is sympathetic to, and ultimately redeems herself by the conclusion with a happily ever after.

The exploration of all these aspects clearly highlights that the relationship between fairy tales and their audience has drastically changed over time. The values and attitudes of audiences have changed significantly with the narratives and mediums of fairy tales changing alongside to reflect that. Audiences have grown to take more of an interest in the morally grey over the simple black and white, good vs evil, which as had a knock-on effect into fairy tale villains and how the audience perceives them. Furthermore, the place and perception of women has drastically changed in society since fairy tales originated and the contemporary reimagining’s have supported this. The role of the female villain has taken on a whole new perspective and gained sympathy from the audience, highlighted by Maleficent. The story of *Maleficent* is now about a villain who was betrayed and justifiably seeks redemption, something that the modern audience has taken a liking to, given its popularity.

To conclude, Fairy tales have undergone significant changes over the years in order to keep up with an ever changing modern audience. There have been shifts in the values society hold, largely to do with feminism and the attitude towards women. For stories to be relevant they need to reflect this. It is clear to see how society has changed by looking at the themes, messages and goals portrayed by the characters within modern adaptations of fairy tales. Furthermore, audiences have expressed interest in character’s morality no longer seen as black or white, giving rise to the misunderstood or ambiguous villain and the tragic hero, which is exemplified by Maleficent. Even the mediums through which these stories are told has changed, opening up huge potential for storytelling opportunities and giving further context and character development to our classic tales.

**Conclusion**

These three chapters provide, a comprehensive understanding emerges of how fairy tales continue to resonate with audiences to this day. It is evident that there is a greater understanding to be found in their villains when approaching the narrative with a different perspective or mentality. If one was to keep an open empathetic mind when analysing and examining the actions and methods of villains in these stories then the classic, clear cut lines between good and evil will start to blur. In the first chapter, the roots of fairy tales are exposed, illustrating the transition from the Grimm’s tales to their contemporary adaptations. It is clear to see that the core narrative of fairy tales over the years has stayed relatively the same, showing their timeless importance. However, the chapter further highlights their adaptability in that the stories have shown to be malleable in order to keep up with an ever changing audience. The many variations of fairy tales can act as time capsules, capturing the values and ideas of society at different points in time.

The second chapter delves into the nuanced portrayal of villains, particularly Maleficent and how contemporary adaptations have shown her to be a greatly misunderstood character. This effectively shows the many ways in which a villain can be portrayed and how given a fresh perspective it is difficult to class them as a villain at all. Despite the importance of a villain within a fairy tale there is much to be said in labelling them as evil, which is what the classic tales would have reader’s believe. Maleficent serves as a prime example in how a villain, given the right perspective and context to the audience, may not see themselves as a villainous, evil person and the audience may sympathise with them if they were to be put in the same position.

Finally, the third chapter explores the symbiotic relationship between fairy tales and the modern audience, emphasizing the evolving dynamics of morality and character complexities. The modern audience has a clear desire to see shifts in classic fairy tale tropes such as the stereotypical evil villain or the damsel in distress, and fairy tales have been reworked to appeal to this desire. Characters are meant to seem more relatable, with realistic goals and aspirations. There is no longer an appreciation for characters who are presented as mere one dimensional caricatures, whose only presence is to represent an outdated idea. The modern villain has transformed from a figure of pure evil because the narrative demands it, to a human character with realistic emotions and goals.

These chapters collectively reveal a dynamic relationship between timeless tales and the ever changing societal values. Fairy tales, in their adaptability, continue to captivate audiences by mirroring the values and expectations of each era. Maleficent is a prime example of this evolution, transforming from a traditional villain into a complex character whose story aligns with contemporary perspectives. Modern audiences look for moral ambiguity in storytelling, challenging the traditional and simplistic good vs evil dynamic.

In conclusion, fairy tales do not remain frozen in time, but exist as living entities, reshaped and revitalized by each generation, and in turn so do their villains. Over time the villains within these stories will become changed, morphed by the audiences ever shifting values and desires into various roles such as anti-hero, tragic hero or even into the classic hero stereotype, given the right treatment. There will always be a need for villains in fairy tales, however with the shifting narratives, it is no longer clear to identify who the real villain truly is. The allure of these narratives lies in their ability to bridge the gap between what is familiar and what is forever changing, offering timeless lessons that adapt to the ever shifting waves of societal consciousness.

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