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Between the lines: children’s literature and the Disney theme parks

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Abstract

Though the Disney theme parks are a common subject of academic analysis, relatively little research has approached the parks from a literary perspective. In this paper, I apply a theory of children’s literature to the Disney parks. By tracing the similarities between the parks and children’s texts, including their use of a “double” level of address, their focus on oppositional binaries, and their deliberate elision of “adult” elements, I demonstrate how the parks legitimize themselves as both childlike and child-appropriate spaces.

Keywords: Disney; theme parks; children’s literature; childhood; education

1. Introduction

The Disney theme parks have long been a topic of cultural study. They have been characterized as liminal spaces, sites of pilgrimage, hyperreal centers of consumption, imperialistic cultural behemoths, and much more; however, relatively little research has approached the parks from a literary perspective. In his book *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature*, Perry Nodelman (2008) establishes a theory of children’s literature that aligns remarkably well with how the parks operate. While it may seem strange to apply literary theory to a medial form like a theme park, there are in fact a number of similarities between children’s literature and the Disney parks such that Nodelman’s theory provides a new lens for understanding the parks’ relationship to childhood and ideology.

According to Nodelman (2008), children’s literature is characterized by several common traits stemming from the central idea that children require a special kind of literature distinct from literature aimed at adults. This specialization is therefore inextricably derived from adult concepts about what childhood is and should be. For Nodelman, children’s literature is ambivalent and oppositional, apparently simple yet deceptively complex (2008). To exist, it must define childhood, and in doing so, it shapes and constructs childhood (Nodelman, 2008).

While the Disney parks are not “children’s literature” in the traditional sense, they do share a number of similarities with children’s texts. First, and most importantly, both are adult creations predicated on the assumption of a child consumer—the Disney parks are understood to be “child appropriate.” They contain the same elisions, the same optimistic worldview, the same fond nostalgia for childhood that characterize children’s literature. Both the parks and children’s literature conceive of childhood as a kind of utopia, a lost idealized state that adults and children must both shed and aspire to. Over the course of this paper summarizing Karis (2014), I align Nodelman’s theory with several attractions in the parks. By tracing the similarities between the two mediums, I demonstrate how the parks utilize a “double” level of address to legitimize themselves as both childlike and child-appropriate spaces.

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2. Doubleness and Shadow Texts

A key concept of Nodelman's theory of children's literature is the "shadow text," a level of meaning implied but not directly stated in the work (2008, p. 8). According to Nodelman, the simplicity of children's texts necessitates that readers draw from a "repertoire" of knowledge already possessed to make sense of them (p. 9). All texts therefore work on at least two levels of address—the child-targeted surface message and the implied, adult-inflected shadow text (Nodelman, 2008). These messages are in constant tension and are never fully resolved, resulting in the "ambivalence" Nodelman asserts is another key trait of the genre (p. 80). Moreover, they are permeable. Children can, and do, access the shadow text, even as adults engage with the innocent surface message (Nodelman, 2008). In the context of the Disney parks, this interplay between surface and shadow messages works to construct the "childlikeness" of the parks, largely by contrasting them against the "adult" outside world.

One example of this tension is the attraction "it's a small world," which consists of a looped recording of children singing in their native languages while a boat carries passengers past robotic dolls dressed in traditional clothing from nations around the world. Overtly, the ride promotes a message of worldwide peace and understanding. Children are portrayed as clean, happy citizens of the world, unaware of and untroubled by cultural or linguistic difference. Even the stylized manner in which the title is written in Disney materials (in lower case, in quotes) suggests a diminutive, childlike world view. Taken literally, the ride celebrates cultural difference while emphasizing that we are all human and live on the same earth. At the same time, however, the ride is constantly in tension with its shadow text. Lyrics like, "There's so much that we share/ that it's time we're aware/ it's a small world after all" reveal a viewpoint external to and opposite from the overt ideology of the ride. Like the hidden adult narrator in children's books, the lyrics belie an adult worldliness: that people are **not** "aware" of this childlike view of international unity. Even the ride's placement in Fantasyland suggests that such universalist visions are realistic as fairytales. The nations of the world (and indeed, all children) do not get along. The inherent untruth of the ride, impossible for any adult and most child visitors to ignore, calls attention to and denigrates adult knowledge, suggesting that the world would be a better place if everyone recaptured or maintained this (imagined) childlike innocence. This shadow text makes the ride poignant and appealing (or, to others, uncomfortably saccharine) precisely because it does not reflect reality.

3. Binaries: A Home Away from Home

Another shared characteristic between the Disney parks and children's literature is their strong focus on oppositional binaries: adult/child, knowledge/innocence, familiar/exotic, real/fabricated, home/away. All of these binaries play out to some degree in the parks, but as physical spaces, the parks particularly problematize the dichotomy of home and away. In their most basic sense, the parks align best with Nodelman's definition of home: "a controlled and limited space provided for a child by a more knowing and more capable adult in order to protect the child from the less limited but more dangerous world outside" (2008, p. 63). At the same time, however, the parks' central appeal rests on their ability to make visitors feel that they have been transported "somewhere else." Nearly all the castle parks in the world greet visitors with the declaration that "here you leave today and enter the world of yesterday, tomorrow and fantasy." A plaque with these words hangs above the entrances of Disneyland, the Magic Kingdom, Disneyland Paris, and Hong Kong Disneyland. Dedication plaques in Tokyo and Shanghai reflect similar language. The parks are therefore simultaneously wholly "away" as heightened spaces of the non-ordinary, and wholly "home," as enclosed, safe refuges from the pressures, worries, and dangers of the "real world."

Like a children's book, which might expose children to the dangers and pleasures of the greater world from the safety of their own home, the Disney parks simulate encounters with the exotic and far away within a controlled environment. Attractions like the Jungle Cruise or Indiana Jones Adventure dramatize journeys to the far reaches of the globe where visitors face wild animals, belligerent "locals," and mystical curses by pagan deities. These attractions offer a tantalizing performance of danger (all the while remaining resolutely safe and controlled), while also suggesting, through their shadow text, that the real world is neither so forgiving nor so exciting. As noted by Umberto Eco, the parks can engender a kind of "homesick[ness]" for the fake (1967/1986, p. 44). Real safaris do not reliably feature animals mere feet away; real visits to ancient ruins don't result in heart-pounding escapes from traps and curses. While the overt message of the rides is an invitation to engage in dangerous adventure, the shadow text suggests that perhaps it is best to remain safely and more enjoyably at "home"—or in this case, at the parks. As with children's texts, the parks inevitably "justify[] their own existence" (Nodelman, 2008, p. 63).

4. Elision

One ironic aspect of children’s literature shared by the Disney parks is that they are characterized by what they lack almost more than by what they contain. Just as “texts for children form a literature built on exclusions and limitations, of saying less to children than adults know or are capable of hearing themselves” (Nodelman 2008, p. 198), the Disney parks work to remove themselves from the trappings of adult society—of money, labor, sexuality, and violence. Disney is a place of excitement without danger, history without guilt, fantasy without skepticism, progress without loss, product without industry. Economic innovations like the recent Magic Bands at Walt Disney World divorce the concept of money from the act of spending, even as “backstage” infrastructure and performative standards for in-park employees obscure labor. Even attractions which address typically disturbing topics like death, such as the Haunted Mansion, deal with the topic in a carefully edited manner; the ride is free of blood or gore and visitors are not meant to mourn or fear the ghosts they see—after all, they are “com[ing] out to socialize” at a “swinging wake.” Though death may appear frightening from a distance (as with the hanged corpse at the beginning of the ride), up-close, death is revealed to be unserious and even “fun.”

And yet, as facts of life, the very absence of these features of adult society makes them an inevitable part of the parks’ shadow text. Though a true childlike utopia would be free of concerns like money or labor, the parks are driven by precisely these mechanisms, a fact of which every adult is painfully aware. Moreover, the casual elision of “adult” elements inevitably draws attention to their lack. Particularly in historically-themed areas of the parks, Disney’s inability to represent or engage with uncomfortable historical truths (colonialism, violence, racism, sexism, etc.) frequently causes discordance with their innocent, carefree surface messages. In recent years, this tension has become so untenable to Disney’s idyllic messaging that the parks worldwide have begun to move away from the “real” to the entirely fantastical, a trend that can be seen in everything from the addition of Disney characters to “it’s a small world” to the transformation of rides like Ellen’s Energy Adventure to a Guardians of the Galaxy-themed rollercoaster. In Shanghai Disney, the newest of the parks, this trend extends even to the “lands” that section out the park, with Main Street replaced by the cartoon-inhabited Mickey Avenue and the pastiche of real locales found in other parks’ Adventurelands replaced with Adventure Isle, the mythical home of the invented Arbori people.

5. Conclusion

Shadow texts are an inevitable result of content created by adults for children. In the Disney parks, these texts contrast the messaging in the parks with adult knowledge of the outside world, thereby reinforcing the parks’ perception as childlike spaces. And since, as noted by Nodelman, many children’s texts tend to “equate adulthood with a fall from utopian perfection” and position childlikeness as “a state for all human beings, children and adults, to admire and aspire to” (2008, p. 32), in associating themselves with childhood and childlike thinking, the parks position themselves as utopian. The very idea that the parks differ from the “real world” in what they lack and what they provide encourages visitors to see them as suitable (and perhaps even necessary) spaces for children, and further invites children and adults to see them as superior to adult reality. By capitalizing on deep-seated cultural conceptions of children and the value adults place on childhood, the parks become spaces where adults and children alike may both “play” at embodying idealized concepts of childhood.

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