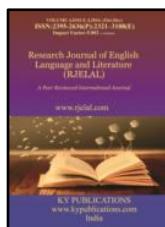


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**STEREOTYPING WOMEN IN THE FANTASTIC****SWATHI METLA**

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E-mail id: [swathimetla@sssihl.edu.in](mailto:swathimetla@sssihl.edu.in) or [swathi.metla3@gmail.com](mailto:swathi.metla3@gmail.com)**ABSTRACT**

Eric Rabkin says that the Fantastic is "reality turned precisely 180 degrees around", therefore, Fantasy can be seen as mirroring real life and critiquing the contemporary times, its society, culture, lifestyles, politics.

This paper attempts to study a select female characters that are clichéd in literature as well as in their respective media adaptations. I would like to work on the fantasy tales of Christian Andersen and Brothers Grimm, and the Walt Disney film adaptations which are inspired by them.

Most of the Fantasy tales or stories are derived from traditional genres - myth, legend, folklore, etc. So they generally employ stereotypes and stock situations, like the rags-to-riches story, a wicked step-mother, love bringing redemption, etc. in the course of the plot line for creating the crisis or resolving it.

The heroines of the Disney movies are charming and intriguing to the audience due to their dynamism and contemporization. For instance, Rapunzel as the daring and naïve protagonist of Tangled captivates adults and children alike.

**Key words:** Fantasy, Stereotypes, stock situation, cliché, women.

**The Definition, Nature and Function of Fantasy :**

Fantasy is a fictional genre that uses structures, motives, and marvellous or supernatural elements, derived from its predecessors in myth, legend, folk-tale and romance, in a novel fashion. The 'fantastic' is the quality of astonishment or the quality of wonder the reader experiences while reading fairy tales. Many fairy (fantasy) tales are about the adventures of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches.

Tolkien applied the term "sub-creative art" to Fantasy as he saw literary creation as the natural outcome of man's own creation in the divine image. The imaginary world is conceived in faithful observation of the rules of logic and inner consistency, which may differ from but are parallel to those operating in our world.

Fantasies are generally imbued with a moral purpose, set in an otherworld, display concern

for contemporary problems. They offer a critique of society through the medium of fantasy which corroborates life. Magic and supernatural creatures are common in works of Fantasy.

Fiction, in particular, a work of fantasy, is made up of words. As Ursula K. Le Guin says 'A world where no voice has ever spoken before; where the act of speech is the act of creation.' Fairy tale and philology have been interlaced ever since Jacob Grimm first studied them both, the linguistic root-stock is inextricable from Briar Rose's hedge. Grimm's study, etymology, derives from Etymon: "the true name of a thing, its first form." Origin is seen as authenticity;

Writers use fantasy to reframe myth: to build novel ways of viewing traditional tales and beliefs. The problem literalists face with Fantasy is its playfulness: Fantasy does not deny myth(Christian or pagan), it rearranges, reinterprets and

reframes it. Its play with symbols facilitates readers to see meaning as elusive and unstable, and not single or self-evident.

The fantastic tale reconstitutes the myth, modern reuse will strip the myth of its actual context. It explores myth, used for satirizing contemporary mores and institutions, meditates on history. It offers scenarios for self-discovery, development, amusement and escape.

**Vladimir Propp and A.J. Greimas on the Fairytale Genre :**

Vladimir Propp chose the genre of magical folk tale, generally known the *fairy tale* or fantasy tale in English. Propp worked out on the fairy tale and outlined its grammar-like structure, making it known that fairy tales usually share a basic outline.

The core laws of his (mathematical) book, *Morphology of the Folktale*, are:

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.

Propp uses the word 'function' to mean significant actions or conditions, for instance the testing of a hero. He finds thirty-one functions, which can be grouped into larger sets like preparation, complication, struggle, return and recognition of the hero, etc. Tales need not consist of all thirty-one, and some functions may be multiplied, but their order of appearance is invariable.

To E.M. Forster, stories are 'low atavistic forms' whereas plots, formed by characters working out on their respective destinies, are mysterious, organic and in some way realistic.

Modern fantasies utilize the fairy tale structure, with an emphasis on the narrative devices like the prophecy and providence. Prophecy refers to the shape of the story, it subordinates characters to the roles they play. Providence shows up in many realistic tales as coincidence. Northrop Frye specifies

that 'In displaced or realistic fiction the author tries to avoid coincidence. That is, he tries to conceal his design, pretending that things are happening out of inherent probability'. For Frye 'displacement' is 'the adjusting of formulaic structures to a roughly credible context'.

An implication made by A. J. Greimas explores Propp's work, wherein the characters in a fairy tale are not treated as people, but as 'spheres of action' as said by Propp. The slant is on how the plot is moved forward by the characters. Greimas divides all characters into two aspects: the *actant* and the *acteur*.

The *actant* stands for the conceptual categories or structural roles that play out their oppositions typically in storytelling, like: the hero, villain(opponent of hero) or the object(of quest) and sender(the initiator of the quest). When the roles are superimposed with distinct character traits, we come to see them as believable personalities and not as mere story functions; Greimas calls them *acteurs* or actors. Therefore, in a fairy tale or any narrative, a typical character is more *actant* than an actor. For instance, the hero of a fantasy tale would be an abstraction that could be a sketch that could be filled in by one's sense of selfhood.

Frye asserts that the story bones are always there , if sometimes well hidden by the literary flesh. One difference between the fantastic and the genres of realism and naturalism is that the fantasy typically displays and celebrates its structure. Propp and Greimas prove that fiction is not an unstructured representation of reality. It earns a meta-fictional dimension by commenting on stories and storytelling as such.

**Work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung - Relevance of the Fantastic :**

The work of Freud and other psychoanalytical approaches share with structuralism the goal of scientifically scrutinising and studying the human mind. Freud's division between the conscious and the unconscious is a structuralist notion. Similarly, the division of the self into various components by Carl Jung is also a structuralist move. The list of Jungian archetypes such as the hero, the shadow, the wise man, and the anima, closely resemble the 'spheres of action' of

Propp, Freud, Jung and their followers turned to the fantastic narrative(dreams, myth, fairy tale, etc.) for validating their theories.

Lacan's dictum 'the unconscious is structured like a language' is relevant and applicable to Fantasy studies, if modified to state that the 'unconscious is structured like a story'. Freud and Jacques Lacan's concept of the divided- self: fantasy 'has a subversive function in attempting to depict a reversal of the subjects[self's cultural formation]'.fantasy and psychoanalysis question the unities of space, time and character - and the attempt to represent them.

Rosemary Jackson demonstrates the association between fantasy literature and resistance to the dominant social order, proposing that the fantastic 'characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack, resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss'.

**Types, Stereotypes, Clichés and Stock Situations:**

E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel*, introduced the new term for flat character - *type* - built around "a single idea or quality" and is presented without much individualizing detail.

The Oxford Dictionary defines the Stereotype as "A widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or data of a particular image or thing." It is generalisation about a class or set of people, usually focusing on the negative or unfavourable characteristics. Therefore stereotypes are generalised or exaggerated and give close-minded view, but are repetitive images which are used as means to achieve ends in a narrative, and lead to discrimination. In literature and media, minor characters are, many a time, stereotyped: they may depict a type, gender, religious group, occupation or class. Cliché is French for "stereotype" and it "signifies an expression that deviates from ordinary use to call attention to itself and has been used too much and is felt to be hackneyed."

Stock-characters are types of persons which recur in a genre, henceforth becoming a part of its usage. For example, a Shakespearean heroine who is disguised as a handsome man.

Stock situations are repetitive action sequences or incidents in a narrative. For instance,

the boy-meets-girl incident at the beginning of the story, and the stock plotline of rags-to-riches story. Fantasy exploits the mechanisms of the myth and ritual: prophecy, miracle, etc.

According to J. R. R. Tolkien, the distinguishing character of "fairy-stories" which includes both traditional and modern fantasies is their ultimate inspiring turn toward redemption or "eucatastrophe". The eucatastrophe occurs as part of the magical fortune or an unexpected resolution in the plot of the fairy or fantasy tale. For example, a fairy Godmother.

Most folk tales may begin with the timeless vernacular of "Once upon a time" and may employ a cadence of languages removed from the world to awaken the mythic echoes in the ordinary. The repeated concluding sentence like "they lived happily ever after" itself is a clichéd notion that repeats over and over, becoming an integral part of storytelling itself.

A few well-liked fairy tales which have been made into films are chosen for this study which is based on stereotyping women within the genre of Fantasy. The original story and the movie adaptations are compared in order to draw parallels and to arrive at several conclusions. A gist of the individual tale/movie is given in order to understand the events and characters in each plot better, after which some points of discussion and conclusions are arrived at.

***The Sleeping Beauty* or *Little Briar Rose*** is part of Grimm's Tales Collection in 1812

Maleficent, the wicked witch who is not invited by the King for the christening of the princess, curses the princess to die by pricking her finger with a spinning wheel at sixteen. Another Fairy gifts Aurora and her kingdom sleep instead of death, till she awakens. So, Aurora/ Briar Roe sleeps for years or centuries varying with each version and is awoken with a true love's kiss and lives happily ever after.

The Sleeping Beauty of 1957 is the retelling of the fairy tale with hardly any changes except for Aurora's sleep which is only for a few days till prince Phillip finds her. Here, Briar Rose or Aurora is a simple and warm person, who could not resist curiosity. Maleficent actually curses the princess

because she is enraged by her parents' disrespect and for not inviting her for the Christening ceremony. The three fairies bring up Aurora in the woods in order to save her from the needle. They keep arguing about the colour of the dress that Briar has to wear on the coronation day. They resist from magic for many years only to be seen by the raven on the fated day. This suggests a slighting attitude, which is an attack against women in general.

Maleficent, the 2014 Disney film, is an interesting reworking of the Grimm's tale *The Sleeping Beauty* wherein Maleficent is innocent, betrayed, embittered and victimised. Maleficent is no clichéd villain in this film, she is rather the heroine. She is a gifted forest sprite who falls in love with a mysterious young man- Stefan, without estimating the greed and ambition that drives a human mind. He cuts off her wings to become the king though he has a choice to be with Maleficent instead, his ambition overpowers his love. She arrives at his daughters Christening ceremony and curses her to a slumber awakened only by a true love's kiss. Stefan's daughter is sent to live with pixies, falls in love with Phillip, pricks her finger with a spindle. Stefan becomes paranoid, and wants to protect Aurora and destroy Maleficent. It is Maleficent who revives Aurora and not Phillip, with her true love and Aurora releases her wings which get reattached.

Maleficent is a novel retelling because the redemptive true love is maternal and not romantic. In this film, love is not the dreamy promising relationship, but a conflict that stirs up a war and divides a kingdom into two due to bitterness and betrayal. In the conflict between selfless love and selfish ambition, Stefan chooses ambition, to let Maleficent live, but without the wings - a life devoid of freedom; whereas he gets a kingdom and comforts in exchange of Wings that are the 'freedom' of someone he *loved*.

**Rapunzel** is published as a part of the Grimms Tales Collection in 1812.

Rapunzel is the story of a girl with magical hair who is locked in a tower and rescued by a prince who she falls in love with. Her witch step-mother tries to separate them, they suffer separation, but are eventually united, and happy.

Tangled, the movie version of the fantasy tale is a thrilling reworking of the tale wherein the rescuer of Rapunzel is actually a good-natured thief, Flynn Rider, who later falls in love with her. But the faith in love exhibited by both Rapunzel and Flynn leads them to their destiny which they realize together. She is not a damsel-in-distress but a single girl needing company.

Tangled is the story of a baby-princess who is kidnapped by a witch for her magical hair that gives youthfulness, beauty and heals. The witch acts as the mother of Rapunzel till she flees for freedom and follows her throughout. Rapunzel craves for seeing floating lanterns which is her only dream. She comes to know of her legacy as it was on her birthday that she was taken away (and the lanterns celebrate the birthday of the princess and await her return). She is nonetheless restored to her parents and lives happily with the man who helps her escape from the witch.

In many ways the story breaks stereotypes in the sense, the hero is no perfect Prince Charming but a rogue in escape. Unlike the tale, the hero is a scoundrel and Rapunzel is a princess. Rapunzel is an intriguing lead who is wise despite being naive due to staying alone all her life. Her dream of seeing the lanterns on her birthday, brings her back to her family. The phenomenon of realizing a dream, and striving for it, in turn, gives her more dreams.

Tangled is a beloved retelling owing to the practicality of the events that take place, especially, the reactions of the lead characters. The story is simple, straight-forward and funny due to the sprinkling of good sense over fantasy which is the core. Animals play an important role in the story. For instance, the pet chameleon that Repunzel keeps is her only friend and confidant. Maximus is a royal horse that tries to turn in Flynn to the police, but helps the couple due to Repunzel's coaxing and gentleness .

Even the romance between the protagonists breaks established stock- situations like love-at-first-sight, Rapunzel hits Flynn with a pan the moment she lays eyes on him. Love begins and deepens with the course of time as they learn about each other. When the witch tries to kidnap her, Flynn cuts off her hair, leading to the death of the

wretched creature, but Rapunzel's tears heals his wound and revives him. Therefore, there is no need of a true love's kiss in this film, instead it is replaced by tears shed for loved ones.

**The Frog Prince or The Princess and the Frog** is part of Grimms Tales Collection

A princess befriends a frog Prince while playing with a ball near a pond and he transforms into a handsome prince with her kiss.

**Princess and the Frog** is an American fantasy romantic comedy by Walt Disney Animation Studios. Tiana is a young chef who wants to have a start-up and is helped by her friend Charlotte, who employs her to cook at a ball thrown by her father in honour of her beau Prince Naveen. Naveen becomes a frog when he meets a voodoo witch doctor - Facilier. He urges Tiana to kiss her mistaking her to be a princess due to her costume, but she in turn becomes a frog. They later find out that Naveen has to kiss a real princess to break the spell. In the course of finding an escape the two fall in love and a firefly Ray helps them. They get rid of Facilier and approach Charlotte for the magical kiss, but it is past mid-night. They finally confess and are stored to human form when they kiss after their wedding. They return to Orleans to celebrate the opening of their new restaurant.

One of the few Afro-American heroines in the Disney animations, the film is full of occult arts and totems. The dark arts and evil shadows in the movie are overly exaggerated. Remaining as frogs for the rest of their lives does not intimidate Naveen and Tiana, as they accept and love each other as they are, this earns them their redemption. Going by the stereotype, the voodoo doctor and the remedy-giver (Mama Odie) are both characters of colour and are subverted, Naveen is an exotic prince, his servant is bloated and greedy.

Love is seen in a different light: the minor character Ray, who loves Evangeline, the star; and sacrifices his life for the lead couple.

Charlotte is portrayed as shallow and vain, though she is an heiress, and fades away next to Tiana with her resilience and ambition. Tiana dislikes stories but does kiss a frog when asked. Though her disregard of magic stems from practicality, there is still hope in her heart. She also does not give up on

Naveen, and opts to be with him, even as a frog. This cements the depth of her character, her steadfastness and ambition set her apart in the story.

**The Little Mermaid** is part of Andersen's Fairy Tales

The Little Mermaid is the story of a lovely young mermaid who falls in love with a prince she saves and sacrifices her voice and tail to become a human so as to be with him. She gives away all that she has for love and remains at his side as he proceeds to wed someone else. She disappears into sea foam and becomes one with the spirits of the air.

The Disney film and the television series depict Ariel as the sixteen year old mermaid in love with Eric whom she saved from the tempest that interrupts his birthday celebrations. She craves to become a human for his sake. This could be viewed as an instance of love or merely as the willingness to change one's identity for the affection of another person.

The barter for transformation is the voice, which is the only aspect of Ariel loved by Eric marking a situational irony. The story is completely changed in the film to give a happy ending to Ariel, damning the fates of many of her loved ones, only to be resolved with the death of Ursula.

Ursula is the villain and takes the form of Vanessa to entrance Prince Eric. She is dressed in black and violet shades. Her sidekicks are killed by herself by mistake which is clichéd. She is stereotyped in the sense that she is shown as greedy, ugly and fat and is usually dressed in black and violet to reflect her vice.

**Snow White** is part of the Grimm's Fairy Tales Collection published in 1812.

Snow White is the story of a princess whose step-mother plots to kill her because the magical mirror tells that Snow White is "more beautiful". She orders a huntsman to do the job, but he spares her. Snow White is sheltered by the dwarves who warn her of strangers. Snow White gets into trouble because the step-mother attempts to kill her in many ways and finally succumbs by tasting a poisoned mirror. The dwarves keep her body encased in a glass case and a prince passing by falls in love with her. He convinces the dwarves to give

her to him. She is revived the moment her coffin is lifted as the apple falls from her lips and marries the prince. The wicked witch dies choking when she sees her nemesis is Snow White, shocked at her survival.

In the 1937 Disney film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, the dwarves are given individual names. But they are stereotypes in the sense they are highly dependent on Snow White, though they have lived normally before she came by. This movie gives them names for the first time: Doc, Grumpy, Happy, Sleepy, Bashful, Sneezy and Dopey. These names are derogatory and therefore, belittle them, fitting them into the category of types.

*Snow White and the Huntsman* is a 2012 Dark Fantasy movie based on the original folk tale of the Grimm compilation. In this particular version, Queen Ravenna, a powerful sorceress, marries King Magnus of Tabor, murders him and brings up her step-daughter, Snow White, imprisoned. She destroys youth from the Kingdom's maidens to keep her youthful beauty. Her Magic Mirror reveals that she can become immortal by devouring her step-daughter's heart. She asks Eric, the Huntsman, to kill her and promises to resurrect his dead wife for striking a bargain; but he soon realizes that she is incapable of it and sides with Snow White. So they escape and he leaves her with the disfigured women in the fishing village, but meet the dwarfs in a later escape. Ravenna tempts Snow White into eating the poisoned apple by disguising herself as William, a childhood mate. Eric in remorse kisses Snow White who is in repose and awakens her, breaking the spell. She rallies the Duke's army to lay seize against Ravenna. The dwarves insinuate the castle and lead the Duke's army and defeat Ravenna.

Its prequel and sequel, *The Huntsman: Winter's Wall* is again a Dark Fantasy adventure film drawing from the fairy tales "*Snow White*" and "*The Snow Queen*". The movie spans a time before its predecessor where Ravenna's sister kills her lover doubting that he killed her baby. She separates children from their parents and trains them to become huntsmen, so that there is no love or heartbreak in their world, this is her ingenuous design. She realizes that she had been tricked by her sister and revolts, annihilating her(Ravenna) in the

process, but eventually dies in peace as Eric and Sara reunite.

In both these films, Ravenna is a very strong villain. She destroys women for her beauty, and kills without an inkling of guilt. She is a femme fatale, a type, but has a flashback wherein her mother had trained her that she needs to have power to survive and win. She cannot live subdued and would go to any extreme lengths to get her work done.

The Snow Queen is a character who is reworked from the fairy tale of Andersen, wherein the Snow Queen is a heartless creature whose enchanted evil mirror embitters people. In this film, the Queen acquires power in a bitter rage where she kills her lover for killing their baby girl. She is a typical mother in the sense she captures children and trains them to become huntsmen and stay away from emotions so as to avoid getting hurt. She has an epiphanic revelation before her peaceful.

Snow White is a round character in the film unlike her naive counterpart in the literary narrative. She is smart, develops leadership qualities and some prowess in order to protect herself and others. At one point in the narrative, she understands her stepmother and this understanding contributes to her individual development as a person. She is a warrior in the film and leads troops against Ravenna.

The Magical Mirror is liquid that reshapes into a man while answering Ravenna's queries. The Film Mirror is graver and morbid as compared to the folk-tale Mirror. It urges her to hunger for Snow White's heart which could grant her immortal beauty, her darkest and deepest wish. The Mirror is more of a character than an object owing to its influence.

**Cinderella or The Little Glass Slipper** is a Grimm's folk tale

This story depicts a myth - the element of unfair oppression that is finally rewarded. The eponymous character is a young lady who is initially unfortunate and subdued by her evil step-sisters and step-mom and finally encounters luck with the help of a fairy Godmother who helps her realise her dream. Her life is changed with a remarkably fortunate turn. Cinderella is an archetype in the

sense that it refers to someone whose talent or qualities are not recognised.

Cinderella in the story and film versions is a perfect teenager who keeps the house but is not adequately appreciated or cherished. Her prayers and hope send her a Fairy-Godmother, who is the *dues ex machina*, sent to fulfill her wish, of attending the ball thrown by the Prince. Cinderella is never angry or arrogant like a normal human. She is patient and her tears are silent. She is a dumb damsel in distress, and prays for her dreams, doing nothing for their materialisation. She is impeccable and well-accomplished, and therefore an eyesore to all the "evil women" in the household. Therefore, she is a perfectly typed 'Angel in the House', making her flawlessness and therefore, humanly impossible.

The Step-mother is an evil woman who looks down and abuses Cinderella because her mother is no more, and sees her as a threat. She piles up work on Cinderella and pampers her daughters. She dresses up her daughters in pretty silks in order to taunt Cinderella. Her step-sisters are typed characters who hate her to the core, because she is all that they are not capable of, an incarnate of perfection that makes them unhappy, though they shun her into a corner. She is sweet to them which fans their jealousy.

The prince and Cinderella fall in love instantly owing to her beauty, talent, tenderness and his charisma. This is a stock-situation which is clichéd in literature as well as its adaptations. The search for the lady whose foot fits the glass slipper is a test that is ordered by the Prince in order to trace the lovely lady who danced with him and won his heart. The slipper-fitting scene is a situational irony since none but Cinderella knows that she is the Prince's mysterious companion. But the very same scene in its earlier book and tale versions is terrible as the step sisters of Cinderella cut their toes and heel in order to fit the glass slipper to their feet. This is a shocking detail which has been later edited in the tales, but the scene was accepted in order to probably show the effects of greed and lust, as they drain one of rationality.

#### **Discussions and Conclusion**

As observed in most of the narratives, one can see the typification that occurs and is

normalised in most of the fictional tales and movies as such. Keeping in mind the points drawn from each tale and its corresponding retelling(s), few points of discussion are listed below:

Firstly, there is no middle ground for women as such in either the stories or their film counterparts. Women are categorised into either the sweet angels, or evil persons with cold hearts and twisted minds. Of course, there are characters like Maleficent and Rapunzel of the movies that break the often portrayed or expected traits of cruelty and naivety respectively. Maleficent has a very understandable backstory as such, akin to Bertha (the madwoman in the attic, in *Jane Eyre*) from Jean Rhys's retelling *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which throws light on her background. The latest movies from Disney have great heroines, who do not toe the line and forge their own paths, not being dependent or needing a guy. For example, Merida (Brave) and Elsa (Frozen) are amazing leads who accomplish great deeds with sheer will and determination, though there are trials initially.

Secondly, the dressup of and colours used by the protagonist and villain are usually typed. For instance, dark and gloomy shades are used for the antagonist and bright or splendid hues adorn the heroine. Maleficent always dons a black gown, Aurora is in white, cream and other lighter shades. So, bright shades symbolise goodness and dark ones stand for evil.

Thirdly, there are a set of expectations regarding the body of the females in the film or other visual media. Even the animated lead ladies are seen as flawless beauties, with tiny waists and sharp features. The villains are supposed to be either fat and ugly (Vanessa in *The Little Mermaid*) or extremely attractive and cunning (Ravenna in *Snow White and the Huntsman*).

Fourthly, some of the heroines are naive, usually willing to sacrifice their self-hood for the sake of someone/something else. Ariel sacrifices her tail in order to get to her love, not thinking of consequences at all. It is not courage but foolhardiness that propels someone to take the drastic step of abandoning home and family for a complete stranger.

Fifthly, as seen in each of the stories and movies, the characters are mere *actants* and not *acteurs*, because they simply represent an emotion or quality or the actions to be done for the story to proceed. Ariel and Cinderella fit the bill of a perfect *actant* or type. Rapunzel, Maleficent and Snow White are *acteurs* who add flesh to the character bones, in order to make them more life-like, imperfect and relatable.

If we need to consider the stock or clichéd situations we come across a galore of situational ironies mentioned before, namely, love at first sight or rising from rags to riches, etc.

Stock characters are also sprinkled into all these films or stories: the seven dwarves, Aurora's guardian angels, Cinderella's godmother, etc., to name a few. These characters could be replaced, and are present only to carry out their part in the narrative.

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