

Peeling Back the Layers: Archetype Subversion and Pro-Diversity Themes in *Shrek*

All media is in some way a reflection of its culture's values. Media producers seeking to make profit must stay true to their target audience, appealing to their cultural and moral outlooks. Recently it has become popular to subvert character archetypes, creating characters which assume unlikely roles within the archetypes they embody, in works such as *Wicked*, *Megamind*, *Hoodwinked*, and many others. This represents a shift in society's values, which now reject assigned roles of 'hero' or 'villain.' Now it is culturally acceptable to embrace groups formerly viewed as monstrous, as evident by the success of the LGBT+ and Civil Rights movements which elevated such groups in societal status. In today's world, homogeneity and oppression of diversity are cultural anxieties, and are demonized, while diversity is championed. The shift in perspective is epitomized by the *Shrek* franchise, particularly *Shrek 1* and *Shrek 2*, wherein concepts such as true love, evil, and beauty in their traditional sense are satirized by subversion of the fairy tale genre.

Shrek begins with a voice telling the story of a princess trapped and in need of saving by a handsome prince, the stereotypical fairy tale (*Shrek*). The reader scoffs in disbelief, and uses a page from the storybook as toilet paper, indicating that he scorns the story's message (*Shrek*). This opening scene sets the tone for the entire franchise, immediately informing the audience that the film intends to satirize the cliché fairytale storyline, as even the characters within the movie meet the ideas of their genre with cynicism (Bacchilega 30). By the genre's logic, Shrek is a monster undeserving of a happy ending, as he is not White, upper-class, or traditionally beautiful. Thus Shrek rejects the genre and the ideas of monstrosity and inherent worth based on

appearance that it represents. Smash Mouth's "All Star" plays during this portion, furthering the theme of rejecting expectations: "Somebody once told me the world is gonna roll me," Shrek is told he is monstrous and in need of defeat by society, or "rolled" by the "world." The line "all that glitters is gold," implies that the outward appearance of things determines their worth, but is followed by "only shooting stars break the mold," which contradicts the previous line (Smash Mouth, 1998). Shrek is the "shooting star" in that he rejects the notion that his outward appearance gives him a certain worth or inward character.

The opening scenes introduce Shrek himself, an archetypal monster. "Shrek" literally means "fear" in Yiddish (Brater 165). He has horn-like ears and green skin, symbolic of nature, chaos, and "little green men," or aliens, and he resides in a dirty swamp outside society (Caputi 26). These characteristics point the viewer to the assumption that Shrek is a villain, as traditional stories would have it. However, his presumed monstrous nature is immediately brought into question when he goes about his daily routines such as brushing his teeth, bathing, and cooking (*Shrek*). The normality of his routine and the fact that he has a routine at all indicate Shrek's sense of self-respect and hygiene. His home is organized and though his methods deviate from the generally accepted methods, such as creating candles from earwax rather than wax, or mud bathing rather than using a tub, his way of life is not unlike the average person's (*Shrek*). Shrek is thus given humanity, giving him status equal to humans in the audience's eyes. In fact, Shrek shows no sign of monstrous behavior while at home until he is threatened by outsiders. When confronted with an angry mob, Shrek has no choice but to behave monstrously and conform to their stereotypes in order to defend himself, (*Shrek*). By doing so, he reaffirms society's belief that he is a monster and has no place among them. Even Shrek himself believes it is best for him to be isolated. He says "they judge me before they even

know me. That's why I'm better off alone" (*Shrek*). Though he understands that "ogres are like onions...they have layers," he is guarded with his vulnerable side because every attempt he makes at genuinity is rebuked by society on the basis that ogres cannot feel emotion (*Shrek*). This unfair treatment sympathizes Shrek as a victim of the prejudiced society which ironically deems itself morally superior to him.

The humans residing in Farquaad's kingdom, DuLoc, represent the opposite of Shrek's chaotic home in nature. They are fastidiously clean and consider themselves without flaw, as shown by their anthem:

"Don't make waves, stay in line
And we'll get along fine
DuLoc is perfect place
Please keep off of the grass
Shine your shoes, wipe your... face
DuLoc is perfect place (*Shrek*).

DuLoc seeks perfection in the form of uniformity and obedience, as they "don't make waves" and "stay in line" (*Shrek*). They are White, majority male, and violently prejudiced toward those who do not follow their definition of perfection. Farquaad says that "I'm not the monster, (Shrek) is. (Shrek) and...that fairy tail trash poisoning my perfect world" (*Shrek*). The townsfolk call Shrek an "it," because they consider him inhuman (*Shrek*). They invade his home, and attack him for his perceived otherness, yet when he responds in kind he is the one called monstrous despite acting only in self defense (*Shrek*). By focusing on and sympathizing Shrek rather than the humans, the film emphasizes the hypocrisy of this situation from the perspective of the one being demonized. Rather than associating nature and otherness with chaos or fear,

they are a friendly place that Shrek calls home (Caputi 32). Society, on the other hand, becomes less of a safe hearth and more of a nest for prejudice, monstrous and foreign to the marginalized people not considered worthy of it.

A diverse group of fairytale creatures are oppressed by the DuLoc kingdom, sold at market like animals despite their clear sentience (*Shrek*). Donkey, for example, can speak and actively pleads with his owner not to be sold, but his pleas are ignored (*Shrek*). He becomes quiet in an attempt to appear as a normal, non-sentient donkey and not be removed from DuLoc with the other creatures (*Shrek*). Similarly, Pinocchio lies and unsuccessfully pretends to be a “real boy” to blend in (*Shrek*). Neither Donkey nor Pinocchio are considered “real” people worthy of rights, because they look different than the residents of DuLoc. Ethnic cleansing of those deemed uncivilized is a hallmark of colonialism, and Farquaad's “resettlement” of Shrek and other creatures is just ethnic cleansing under a different name (Caputi 24, 28). Creatures such as the Big Bad Wolf or Shrek would hold advantages over humans in traditional stories, such as greater physical strength or a captured princess to bargain with. In *Shrek*, the roles are reversed as the princes, Farquaad and Charming, consistently hold power over marginalized “monsters” who are often unable to fight back (*Shrek*). Which of the groups the audience considers monstrous, between a group of deviants from society, or the oppressive society itself, represents a shift in values. Past fairy tale stories had heroes and innocents as pale, passive, beautiful and obedient to their societal roles, while villains were ugly, dark and railed against society (Whitley 79-80). This view made the marginalized out to be monsters due to their physical and cultural differences. However, people now view the marginalized as groups in need of empowerment and acceptance rather than fear. Now victims of marginalization such as disabled people, POC, and members of the LGBT+, are making their voices heard in the

mainstream. Society is beginning to take steps toward no longer viewing these groups as inherently evil based on unchangeable and external aspects of themselves. This shift creates new cultural anxieties to become the monsters and villain in media: homogeny and prejudice. *Shrek's* rejection of these ideas comes in the form of the fairytale creatures rebellion. They are “directionless characters... (that can) realize their potential to avenge the suffering endured by a subaltern community and in doing so become worthy heroes.” (Leen 35). They are made worthy because they see prejudice and strive for change.

Besides the vague archetypal “other” that the fairytale creatures represent, many of them are coded as specific marginalized identities. Pinocchio wears women’s underwear and makes allusions to *Pride* in *Shrek: the Musical*, saying “I’m wood and I’m good,” a play on “We’re here and we’re queer, get used to it,” a popular saying of members of the LGBT+ community during the Gay Rights Movement (Brater 169). The Evil Stepsister is coded as a masculine, gender nonconforming woman, with drag-esque clothing and makeup contrasting what are traditionally masculine features (*Shrek*). In *Shrek 2* The Big Bad Wolf is called “gender confused” for wearing a women’s nightgown and cap. Racial coding is also present in Donkey and Puss in Boots. Donkey embodies racist African American caricatures by playing the part of comedic sidekick (Brater 166). He is also a literal donkey, which like enslaved Black people during chattel slavery, is treated as a beast of burden who is supposed to stay silent and obey (Brater 168). Puss in Boots follows stereotypical depictions of Latino people, with traits of excessive flirtation, such as in *Shrek 2* when he flirts with Fiona, and drug possession, as he is caught with catnip, as has been criticized by many critics (Leen 34). He also has an impoverished status, using his job to feed his poor family (Leen 34). Despite their stereotypical coding these characters are eventually given respect by those around them, which differentiates

them from past stereotypical characters, traditionally used as mere punchlines based on their identities (Brater 169). Rather than accept their assigned positions, they fight for their own rights to a happy ending.

All of the villains- Farquaad, the Fairy Godmother, and Prince Charming- are White, as have been the oppressors of other races in the USA since colonialism began. These villains are also upper-class, and male or motivated by a male. Their motives are based in their interest in power and maintaining the social hierarchy as it is, with them at the top and fairytale creatures at the bottom. This is why Farquaad has an interest in marrying a princess to become a king, and why the Fairy Godmother wants Fiona to marry her son, a member of high society (*Shrek*).

The Fairy Godmother, like Farquaad, is a subverted form of what is usually considered one of the 'good guys'. Fairy Godmothers are placid, unsexualized, generic, and mysterious; they are either neutrally aligned or concerned with ideals like helping good conquer evil (Jorgensen 218-221). The *Shrek 2* Fairy Godmother is the opposite; she is opinionated, expressing disgust at ideas and people she deems unworthy, and sexualized by her curvaceous figure and flattering outfits (Jorgensen 220-222). She is not an ethereal or mysterious being, but a shallow person motivated by self-serving pursuits. Rather than concerning herself with a true happy ending for Fiona, which would be a life with Shrek, the Fairy Godmother uses her powers to steer Fiona toward her own son Prince Charming and indoctrinate her into the Fairy Godmother's own happy ending (*Shrek 2*). She sings a song to Fiona advising her to seek outward beauty to find love, and tells Shrek "ogres don't live happily ever after" (*Shrek 2*). This attempt to keep Shrek and Fiona in their assigned societal roles and force them to want what they are 'supposed' to want demonizes the media for its overly specific ideas of what should make people happy. The Fairy Godmother represents commercialism and mainstream media

influencing people toward a materialistic happy ending rather than an emotionally fulfilling life. Her song in *Shrek 2* reads like a commercial: “With a flick of the wrist and just a flash/You'll land a prince with a ton of cash/...A high-priced dress/And no more stress... Your worries will vanish, your soul will cleanse” (*Shrek 2*). The Fairy Godmother lists objects meant to make Fiona happy in artificial ways, like removing cellulite from her thighs, “banishing (her) blemishes” to be the kind of girl a “prince with a sexy tush...rock hard abs...and perfect hair” would date (*Shrek 2*). She implies instantaneous and easy relief with a “wave of a magic wand,” but none of her solutions are long-term nor will they improve her already loving marriage with Shrek (*Shrek 2*). The Fairy Godmother tears down other women to build herself up, selling them an unachievable idea of beauty and happiness to sell potions and further her own goals. Fairy Godmothers are traditionally associated with fate (Jorgensen 219). She has a specific route planned for the lives of Fiona and Shrek, entailing the two of them returning to their expected roles in society and being happy with that (*Shrek 2*). The Fairy Godmothers definition of love is a “sexy tush,” “perfect hair,” and wealth, but Fiona wants none of those (*Shrek 2*). She wants to be accepted for herself, the option which society never gave her, locking her in a tower for her perceived flaws and later trying to force her to change herself to be one of them (*Shrek 2*). Fiona left society to be with Shrek because she realized the media's idea of love based on looks and status was a lie, and that inner beauty is more appealing. Her disinterest in Charming despite his physical beauty, status, and wealth, and her pursuit of Shrek even as she is pressured to love someone else exemplify this (*Shrek 2*). The Fairy Godmother might have effectively influenced Fiona when she was locked in a tower and repressing the part of herself society hates, but once she chooses to embrace all of herself, she transcends the influence of European beauty standards and the media.

There is an exception to the White upper class villain rule: Fiona. She is White and upper class, but not a villain. Fiona is part human and part ogre, making her the ideal mediator between fairytale creatures and humans, nature and society, diversity and conformity (Caputi 30). Fiona is key to the plot of *Shrek* and *Shrek 2*, because both polarized groups consider Fiona one of them, and in order to gain Fiona's continued presence, they must come to an understanding. Shrek and Fiona fall in love because they fill each other's lacks. Fiona grants Shrek his humanity, understanding that ogres have layers and feel vulnerability, traits society deemed him incapable of due to his appearance (*Shrek 2*). Meanwhile Shrek grants Fiona acceptance of the parts of her deemed unacceptable by high society, such as independence, self defense skills, and burping (*Shrek 2*). He lets her be herself, saying "better out than in," meaning she can express even the disagreeable parts of her personality and still be beautiful (*Shrek 2*). However, Fiona still has a strong love for her family and wants to stay connected to society even while living with Shrek. The King sees Shrek and the fairytale creatures as having stolen Fiona away from society, so Shrek and the King engage in a battle for Fiona (*Shrek 2*). Fiona is conflicted, as she is expected to choose one of her identities over the other, once and for all, when in fact both are equally important to her. Her anxiety over this situation mirrors the struggles of multiracial people, members of the LGBT+ community, or other identities seen as 'clashing' who are told to choose between parts of themselves, such as between two cultural identities, or between their sexual orientation and their family's acceptance, etc. This cultural anxiety creates monsters of both Shrek and the King, as they want Fiona to make an impossible choice when in reality she loves both sides of herself.

Fiona then takes Shrek to meet her parents and be "accepted into the family," meaning she wants him to adhere to and gain the approval of mainstream society (*Shrek 2*). Fiona's

half-ogre status is treated as a curse by her parents, who both appear human (*Shrek 2*). Her father is secretly a frog, a fairy tale creature who has effectively disguised himself as a White man (*Shrek 2*). In the stereotypical fairy tale, the frog prince reaches his full potential by becoming a man, but for the king it is the opposite. Throughout the movie he attempts to set Fiona up with Prince Charming, to preserve the social hierarchy and reject his past as an outcast fairy tale creature (*Shrek 2*). He is like the rest of the Whites in his prejudice toward Shrek and Donkey. He treats Donkey as non-sentient and tries to refuse him a seat at the table, then makes several remarks on Shrek's lifestyle, such as, "An ogre in a swamp, oh how original," and "assuming you eat your own young" (*Shrek 2*). Shrek tries to conform to White European beauty standards, succumbing to the Fairy Godmothers trap of commercializing happiness (*Shrek 2*). Though he is immediately accepted by society after his gentrification, he is nonetheless unhappy because he doesn't have what he truly wants, Fiona's unconditional love. The King finally realizes he and Shrek are not so different, because they both embraced a new culture to be with their loved one (*Shrek 2*). He remembers that he was not always upper-class and White, and there was a time he was driven by true love rather than conformity to social norms. The King then takes (the magical equivalent of) a bullet for Shrek, transforming him back into a frog, which represents his full-circle transformation: He has accepted his cultural roots and remembered his true form (*Shrek 2*). His wife says he is "a greater man than ever, warts and all" (*Shrek 2*). He is accepted for his full identity, and understands that true love is not based in status or appearance, which is why Fiona and Shrek are happy despite their differences.

The ending song of *Shrek*, Smash Mouth's "I'm a Believer" represents the overall themes of the franchise. "I thought love was only true in fairy tales/meant for someone else but not for me," society and mainstream media does not see Shrek as worthy of living in society nor

loving Fiona because he does not conform to their standards of White, upper-class, and conventionally beautiful (*Shrek*). However, he and the fairytale creatures representing the ‘other’ of diversity defeat the forces of traditional society, such as uniformity and media beauty standards, so Shrek can find true love (*Shrek*). Fiona and Shrek’s love creates an understanding between the fairytale creatures and society, so they can live in harmony. This uprising of diversity to overcome homogeneity represents the current cultural idea of diversity as ultimately heroic and good, and enforcement of uniformity as evil.

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