

The Clock Strikes Twelve

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Fairytales are forever satisfying. In a good fairytale, the ending is clear because the bad guy will always lose and the good guy will always win—the princess is too beautiful for it to be any other way. In one classic fairytale, the impeccably kind Cinderella bustles around her home day-in and day-out, willingly tending to the needs of her evil stepmother and stepsisters. Her blond hair shines elegantly despite the assortment of rustic clothes she patches together each day. The condition of her life, which has taken a sudden turn for the worse with the death of her mother, cannot quell her righteousness; many animal friends are a testament to her sweet temper. Instead of rebelling against a lifestyle that needs much improvement, Cinderella contents herself knowing that “no matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing, the dream that you wish will come true.” Only at the last moment, minutes before the ball is about to begin, do we realize that Cinderella is right. Because of her unparalleled goodness and stunning beauty, a fairy-godmother uses the best of magic to grant Cinderella the miracle she’d been dreaming about.

We rely on our preconceived expectations when engaged in fairytales, knowing, as Vladimir Propp tells us in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, that we will certainly find specific roles being fulfilled: he defines seven characters that frequently appear in fairytales: “a villain, a donor, a helper, a princess, a dispatcher, a hero, and a false hero” (qtd. in Webster 1). Favorite stories, like *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Snow White*, verify our expectations again and again as we identify the villain in the evil stepmother, the donor in the fairy godmother, and the magical helper in some friendly mice. Cinderella is our princess for sure, and the ever-dashing Prince Charming makes a wonderful hero. Despite our faith in these characters, we still cringe during the fight scenes and cheer for the first kiss, nearly tricked out of our assurance.

Film makers today are getting better and better at masking the simple fact that we love watching the same plot over and over again. “All stories . . . especially the artful lies we invent to satisfy the wishful thinker in us . . . pre-

sent to us, in disguise often and at great distance, the way . . . we want to be,” writes author Lee K. Abbott in “The True Story of Why I Do What I Do” (87). In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, directed by Michel Gondry, it is easy to be distanced by the elements the film accentuates—a horrific breakup, feeling in a funk, ordinary camera angles—and yet it is impossible to ignore the fact that we are given a basic “dull guy falls for eccentric girl” scenario. Here the couple’s oppositely attracted love is too strong for even the villain, in this case Dr. Howard Mierzwiak, head of a memory-erasing clinic. There are no dragons or spells, but we do struggle with the miracles of science and technology before we come to the glorious conclusion that love conquers all.

Psychologically, it is not surprising that we find some form of relief in the concept of the fairytale. “Twentieth-century psychologists, notably Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Bruno Bettelheim, have interpreted elements of the fairy tale as manifestations of universal fears and desires” (“Fairy Tale”). In the simplest form, the morals a fairytale embodies are something we learn to recognize as children—ideal scenarios that have concrete consequences. We like the fundamental, positive outcomes fairytales present because they show us “the way we . . . would want [life] to be” (Abbott 87). Ironically, Michel Gondry is the master of masking these basic tales brilliantly and often intentionally, hiding common stories beneath artistic interpretations.

A basic love story is told in Bjork’s song “Bachelorette,” but it is hidden beneath the attention given to Bjork herself. We follow the star through a self-discovery from black and white to color, from village to city. Gondry models the continually fast-paced scene-changing after the song’s constant base beat. But in being attentive to detail, we find commentary beyond the music—on a struggle with stardom, on societal expectation, on lifestyle, and, of course, on love. A twisted fairytale grounds the story. We get a message, one that is not being told in the lyrics of the song but is being told instead by Gondry’s non-verbal commentary on the musician, her music, her surroundings. In making music videos, Gondry depicts their relationship to the world, ultimately revealing something about society as well. These messages are almost subconscious, working with and through the music.

In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Gondry’s creativity embellishes the erasing procedure, allowing us literally to experience the protagonist’s mentality as he undergoes the science-fiction operation. Though erasing an entire person from memory is impossible today, we are as wrapped in the procedure as we are in the spells and potions of fantasy, or even in the music of the videos he invents. Gondry’s foggy transitions seamlessly blend the pieces of memory together, making it hard for us to realize that we are not actually

receiving the story chronologically. Simple but poignant details, like lights being turned off, a car being repeatedly misplaced, and a comment being directed to two people simultaneously, add to the mystery.

Such visual complications make it impossible to automatically view *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as a fairytale because the movie's very construction prevents it. At the start of the film, we meet Joel, a much sedated Jim Carrey, and find his life to be as dreary as the opening camera shots: the most exciting point of interest is a little birdhouse that swings gloomily in front of a shining glass window. The music models his nature—torpid, focused on routine—as we watch him get tangled in his bed sheets, find a dent in his car, and uncharacteristically exchange his work-bound train for another location. “Montauk in February, brilliant Joel,” he mutters to himself in brutal sarcasm. While his entire life and personality are comprehensible, we do not know why this ordinary man, a character that does not cleanly fit into any of Propp's seven fairytale roles, has woken in a funk. But he does not know either, and this we can understand; as humans, we relate to his irrational frustration. Soon, we follow Joel through a blustery, deserted, snow-covered beach, watch him begrudgingly meet a very original woman, and return to the train. A clear-cut fairytale romance with a modern twist soon presents itself: melancholic boy meets eccentric girl; they are sure to fall in love. Though we eventually realize they do, the events appear discombobulated, revealed to us through chunks of Joel's mind as he is having them removed. As a result, we do not fully decipher the process until the movie's end.

This disjunction is intentional. Although we are used to subconsciously being aware of a movie's outcome, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* provides no such comfort. By hindering our comprehension of the plot, it is increasingly difficult for us to be secure in our predictions of the movie's future: we are unaware of how the characters relate, why they sometimes appear, and what functions they serve. We are left dazed by the constantly changing scenes so fluidly connected that we sometimes do not even realize that the characters are suddenly babies sitting in a kitchen sink, or that it has started raining inside the living room. The mystifying circular-chronology prevents us from always knowing whom we should be supporting or even for what we should be supporting them.

Even more confusing are the roles of the prince and damsel. While Jim Carrey seems like an obvious choice for the man who should save Princess Clementine (Kate Winslet) from her dungeon of eccentricity, bad hair dyes, and alcohol abuse, Joel is far from valiant and brave. Instead, we are given an exceedingly dull, immensely standard, mediocre-man. Clementine herself

does not openly play the dainty, helpless princess but is instead a spontaneous, outgoing, wild girl. It is her very free-spirited nature that drives the plot of the film (she is the one to go to Dr. Mierzwiak first and have the erasure done). Our false hero Patrick (Elijah Wood), a young man who works for Villain Mierzwiak, also puzzles us by being particularly likable. His innocently sedated personality, eager with good intentions, encourages us to forgive him for being bizarre and dissolute at times. We are even happy for him as he temporarily succeeds in winning the princess's heart, though as soon as his manipulative behavior is fully revealed and his connection to Dr. Mierzwiak verified, we, of course, root for Prince Joel once again.

Perhaps the trickiest role to classify in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is that of the Donor, an individual who, ideally, "prepares the hero or gives [him] some magical object" (Webster 1). However, in this particular defamiliarized fairytale, Propp's structure overlaps: Dr. Mierzwiak, the villain, actually acts the role of the Donor by enabling Joel to erase Clementine; he is the man who deconstructs their decaying relationship by removing the memory each has of the other. In doing so, he revives their love. The magic, against which Joel fights so strongly, is what saves him (and her) in the end. The knowledge of their loss seems to make them different somehow, older and wiser with a wisdom that will not allow the worst aspects of them to jeopardize their love. Without a clean slate, the two would surely have separated permanently. In this rare occurrence, we are forced to consider the possibility that our prince and princess may not have lived perfectly together after all.

By obstructing our view of the traditional fairytale, Gondry essentially prevents us from finding comfort in the film's end. Clementine's spunky bravery (a characteristic Joel should have embodied) chatters vivaciously in the dark of the old, empty house—the location of their first adventure. The house and the memory literally collapse around them, sand filling in the cracks of Joel's mind as Clementine's hideously appropriate orange sweatshirt bobs more and more faintly. Her voice echoes, almost fighting the growing growl of nighttime ocean and wind, until we hear Joel's inner thoughts. His hazy outline seems surreal as he wades through the icy water that has entered the collapsing house: our prince admits his fear of this last memory, but it is too late. "Meet me in Montauk," she whispers as she leans toward him, soon to disappear, outlined by the darkness and a single spotlight.

Not only are we given an unexpected result in this scene, but also we never fully comprehend the logistics of the ultimate conclusion. We are left, temporarily guessing at how Joel and Clementine are reunited. We cannot know if her words implant themselves subconsciously into Joel's mind, some-

how escaping the Doctor's watchful eye. We cannot know if it is Fate that overrides all things, making lovers inseparable in any atmosphere. We cannot know if the procedure actually saved them, giving the two a chance to forget harsh words. Our uncertainty, however disheartening in its un-fairytale-like way, is fulfilling on an entirely different level because it does leave us to possibility, and, in that sense, brings us even closer to reality. Within a few heart-wrenching minutes, we leave this precious goodbye of Joel's mind and find the two interacting again in real life, though slightly disillusioned at the prospect of having undergone the erasures.

In "The True Story" Abbott does more than tell us that "all stories . . . present to us . . . the way . . . we would want to be." He also convinces us that "all stories . . . present to us . . . the way we are" (87). For him, admitting the presence of reality means recognizing his father, a "crazed, driven and cross-hearted [hero]" in many of his works (87). Though he does not write about him directly, each of Abbott's male characters embodies his father's characteristics, his features, his morals, his lessons, in some sense. Abbott's fiction, a literary derivative of the fairytale-movie, acts as a means to explore his frustration about his dad while rationalizing his emotions and controlling his energy. Abbott memorializes his father in each of his novels, taking pieces of his memory through his works.

If we write . . . it is . . . because we all feel . . . the obligations we have to our fathers, to our mothers, to all the folks . . . who have raised us; an obligation, as essential to our moral natures as our hearts are to long life, to the places we were raised in and in the knowledge we learned there. We want, I hope . . . to write it down, to transform it, to set it straight. (90)

Ironically for both Abbott and Gondry "[setting] it straight" does not mean providing a factual regurgitation. Instead, each uses creative license and explores his own realities through fiction. Abbott recognizes the "artful lies" of which he is so fond and runs with them. Simply because he uses fiction to invent new worlds does not mean his messages or characters are irrelevant.

In the same sense, Gondry chooses to distill the traits of a fairytale to admit the presence of reality to his audience. His mini-worlds of film maintain value because they deal with elements of truth in their own, unique way. They are still disillusioning because it would be impossible for everyone to be as beautiful as the stars that dot his features; it would be impossible for everyone to be as happy as they are, as talented, as wealthy. But even after spending weeks creating these small utopias, Gondry, and his audiences, must realize that they are simply that – illusory creations. And so by deconstructing the

essential elements of a fairytale, the psychological epitome of a utopia, Gondry allows us to find glimpses of the real world in his artful lies. He makes his movies differently, accenting the un-fairytale ingredients, the harshness, the struggles, the falsehoods, the toils, in a modern way. His message in defamiliarizing the fairytale, is, in fact, to reassure us of reality. By giving us choices, he reminds us of possibility in place of assurance. He still creates movies with magic and villains, but in a sense, ones that are more believable than Cinderella's glass slippers and pumpkin carriages. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* is a film that tells a fairytale perhaps, but a special fairytale, a modern tale where magic results in mediocrity.

The bittersweet closing surely expresses this idea. Though the scene is biting realistic and the dismissal has not followed our ordinary predictions—Propp himself would be slightly disillusioned—the couple has fallen in love again. Fate is victorious; love triumphant, and our prince and damsel have saved one another by acknowledging life's undistinguished normalcy. "O.K." remarks Joel with tolerance, as he gazes lovingly across the realistic, iridescent hallway. "O.K." replies Clementine with a smile and a laugh. We smile too, as we watch them, lost in their imperfect world. And for whatever reason they found themselves there, we like it that way, happily ever after.

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