Is Prince Charming Still a Prince?: A Critical Analysis of the Portrayals of Prince Charming and Masculinity in Current Television Programming

Fairy tales are popping up everywhere in popular culture. From movies like Mirror, Mirror and Snow White and the Huntsman to television shows such as Once Upon a Time and Grimm, it is hard to escape the stories and the images. Contemporary retellings of classic fairytales are particularly interesting to explore as a lens to popular culture as they can show the audience current cultural stories in comparison to classic ones.

Particularly interesting are the current interpretations of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs on television. Corcorran (1984) explains,

Through television, a particular social point of view is universalized and legitimized by its reification of ‘standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it and standards for deciding how to go about doing it’ (Goodenough, 1971, p. 22)” (p. 135).

Television provides a medium in which the viewer can reflect on social norms and expectations. With the increase in the number of television shows using fairytales as their underlying story, we must dissect the narratives to understand how they are representing various aspects of our current culture.

In this presentation, I explore the construction of masculinity through the character of Prince Charming in the original Grimm’s fairytale, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, ABC’s sitcom, The Charmings which aired from 1987 to 1988, and ABC’s television drama series, Once Upon a Time which began airing in 2011. Specifically, I utilize the original Grimm’s
fairytale as a starting point in understanding the transformation of Prince Charming and his demonstrations of masculinity.

*The Charmings* was produced for two seasons—21 episodes. The premise of the show is explained in the opening credits,

Once upon a time there was a vain queen who was so jealous of her beautiful stepdaughter, Snow White, that she poisoned her with an apple. But, a handsome prince came along and broke the spell. Snow White and Prince Charming threw the wicked stepmother down a bottomless pit and lived happily ever after. But, it turns out the pit wasn’t bottomless—just very deep. And now, the queen was very mad. With a spell so powerful even she couldn’t control it, she put the Charmings to sleep for a thousand years. She also go herself, and one dwarf. Eventually they woke up. (Fraser, Sternin, & Mackenzie, 1987)

When the Charmings wake up from their sleep, they find themselves in Burbank, California trying to fit in with modern day society. The first episode of the series fully deals with their time lapse as Snow White Charming is shown in her princess gown and Eric Charming is shown in his medieval attire (Fraser, Sternin, & Mackenzie, 1987). Season one of *The Charmings* featured six episodes as part of ABC’s “TGIF” line-up and then was transitioned to Thursday evenings for the second season which included 15 episodes. The last episode was never aired (“Charmings,” 2011). The ratings for the second season of *The Charmings* were disappointing—though some say it is because the show was scheduled opposite *A Different World, The Cosby Show* spin-off (“Charmings,” 2011).

*Once Upon a Time* has had much better success than *The Charmings*. *Once Upon a Time* is based around the premise that the evil Queen has cast a spell on a variety of fairytale
characters including Snow White, Prince Charming, Red Riding Hood, and Pinnochio and they are all living in Storybrook, Maine. Emma Swan, the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming, arrives in Storybrook—unbeknownst to her—to save the town from the Queen’s evil spells. Few people in the town know they are under the Queen’s control but Henry, the Queen’s adopted son, is determined to convince people of the truth. In the first season, *Once Upon a Time* was the highest rated new drama (Kondolojy, 2012) and secured its place as “ABC’s #1 show” (“ABC’s,” 2012, para. 1). Critic Terrence Rafferty (2012) explains,

> In its pulpy way the show evokes a sort of neither-here-nor-there feeling that seems widespread now in the developed world, a chronic sense of unreality. It isn’t a profound show, but an undercurrent of melancholy runs through it, even as it jauntily updates, mashes up and revises the stories we all grew up on. At its best, *Once Upon a Time*, can make you feel both young and very, very old at heart. (para. 13).

Both television shows, *The Charmings* and *Once Upon a Time*, provide excellent texts for analysis of the progression (or stability) of masculinity. Both shows work to demonstrate the original Grimm version of Prince Charming adapting to modern day life.

*The Charmings* positions the Grimm’s incarnation of Prince Charming in modern day to see how he adapts to current standards of masculinity. Eric Charming finds himself in situations that challenge his original fairytale ideas of what is means to be a man. For instance he struggles with purchasing a car for Snow for their 1010th anniversary (Guylas & Foster, 1987), has to deal with his wife’s jealousy with Cinderella (“Cindy”) shows up to visit (Honingblum, Phillips, & Shea, 1987), must demonstrate his ability to protect his family in the episode “The Charmings Get Robbed” (Honingblum, Phillips, & Shea, 1988), and deal with being branded “too nice” to be a salesperson (Fink & Murray, 1988). Additionally, there are two episodes, “Trading Places”
(Fink & Shea, 1987) and “Incredible Shrinking Prince” (Myer, Young, & Shea, 1987) where Eric’s manhood is literally made smaller in the contemporary world. In both episodes he has to deal with being cut down—representing an interesting struggle on screen of a man trying to reclaim his masculinity.

*Once Upon a Time* also offers a unique perspective on Grimm’s idea of Prince Charming (as interpreted by the writers of the show) by offering two coinciding narratives—one of the original fairytale and one of the everyday life of Prince Charming, also known as David Nolan in Storybrook, Maine. The juxtaposition of the two narratives provides a unique lens in which to interrogate representations of masculinity—the viewer can see how it was in the fairytale versus how it is in “real” life. In modern times, David Nolan struggles as he finds himself falling in love with Snow White, otherwise known as Mary Margaret, while also being married to another woman (Chambliss, Goldberg, & Nelli, 2011; Epenson & Edwards, 2011).

In the presentation, I present my findings from the analysis of Grimm’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Charmings*, and *Once Upon a Time* to find the most common themes surrounding masculinity to assess whether the narratives have changed about what it means to be a man. Drawing on the work of Connell (2005) and Rotundo (1993), I explore how the images and narratives of masculinity have progressed or remained stable throughout popular culture.


