

Growing Up in Magical Time: Representations of Female Growth and Development in ABC's *Once Upon a Time*

In 2004 Donald Haase asserted that additional fairy-tale scholarship needs “to be devoted to other significant media, such as film, video, and television as well as art and illustration” (*Fairy Tales and Feminism* 30). In response, fairy-tale scholars such as Jack Zipes, Pauline Greenhill, Kendra Magnus-Johnston, Sue Short, Cristina Bacchilega, Kristian Moen, Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario, Karen Lury and Sidney Eve Matrix, have offered significant contributions to our understanding of fairy-tale films. Like film, “television has made frequent use of fairy-tale materials and kept the genre in public consciousness” (Haase, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia* 947). There has consequently been a growing interest and need to explore the interplay between fairy-tale narratives and television. In this pursuit, scholars such as Bacchilega, Greenhill and Jill Terry Rudy have recently discussed the production of fairy-tale television in a post 9/11 climate (Bacchilega) and compiled an anthology that considers the use of fairy-tale motifs, tropes and characters in contemporary television programming (Greenhill and Rudy). To contribute to this research, this article explores how the bilateral relationship between form and content informs representations of female growth and development in the contemporary televisual fairy-tale adaptation *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-present).

More specifically, in considering the interplay between form and content, this article responds to Rudy's assertion that, with “[m]ost scholarship to date center[ing] on tales as texts; the different medial and technological iterations of tales have received less attention from scholars trained in literary studies and folklore programs” (140). In addressing Rudy's remarks, this article details how the interplay between form and content in *Once Upon a Time's* (*OUaT*) adaptation of “Snow White” facilitates complex stories about female growth (physical and emotional) to emerge. Centrally this article argues, that in exploring the

interplay between form and content it becomes evident that *OUaT*'s episodic storylines challenge Western chronometric accounts of time and growth;¹ speak to dominant Western perceptions surrounding “ideal” emotional development (specifically out of youth);² and facilitate a level of fluidity within representations of female growth and character development as age categories are blurred.

Programme Overview

First aired 23rd October 2011 (“Once Upon a Time”), *OUaT* began its sixth season in September 2016. Rated Parental Guidance (season one) and Not Rated (season two), *OUaT* draws on fantasy, romance, adventure and detective genres. As an ABC/Disney affiliated production, *OUaT*'s magical world employs fairy-tale Disney's iconic images, and incorporates a host of fairy-tale characters, such as Red Riding Hood (Meghan Ory), Rumpelstiltskin (Robert Carlyle), Cinderella (Jessy Schram), and Belle (Emilie de Ravin) to name a few. The programme's characters, and their magical experiences are brought to life through special effects as characters conjure fire, move objects through the air, create potions, cures and curses, and disappear into smoke. While magic is often used as a means of protection or as a way to secure characters' ambitions, hopes and dreams, the use of magic often comes with a cost. Consequently, characters' struggles are rarely resolved, as magical solutions lead to new conflicts.

As the programme incorporates and adapts a variety of fairy-tale stories, this article will focus on the first and second season (44, hour-long episodes), which place Snow White (Ginnifer Goodwin), the queen (named Regina; Lana Parrilla) and their conflict at the heart of the programme. In these two seasons, the programme's central storyline takes place in a small town in New England, America, called Storybrooke, while the characters' fairy-tale stories are shown in flashbacks of the fairy world. The flashbacks run concurrently with the

Storybrooke plotline, as the two storylines are played off one another to give additional depth to these traditionally one-dimensional characters (Whitehurst). As I will detail shortly, the flashbacks are presented in an episodic structure, with each episode exploring one storyline, which concludes at the end of the episode. These episodic storylines will be the primary focus of this article, as I unpack their engagement with and representation of Snow White and the queen.

OUaT's use of flashbacks is not unique to the television medium and in fact closely aligns with the use of flashbacks in the programme *Lost* (2004-2010). It is perhaps unsurprising that *OUaT*'s use of flashbacks mirrors *Lost*, as Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz, the creators of *OUaT*, both worked on *Lost* as writers, supervising producers, co-executive producers and finally as executive producers ("Edward Kitsis"; "Adam Horowitz"). The programmes' overlap also extends beyond their use of episodic flashbacks to their varying temporal depictions within the episodic and serial storylines, with the episodic and serial tellings governed by different understandings/representations of time and temporality. However, where this complex engagement with time and temporality in *Lost* facilitated an exploration of religious, philosophical and scientific understandings of destiny, faith and reason (see Burcon), in *OUaT* the "Snow White" tale provides the space to explore female character development and growth beyond chronological understandings of time and temporality.

The flashbacks represent one component of *OUaT*'s complex story structure, which is a hybridisation of the series and serial structure. Where series programming functions as "an anthology of short stories" (Kozloff 91) and serial programming takes shape across several episodes or across a season (Creeber 8), the hybridised structure is "characterised by both the serial format for the long story arc with open storylines and their combination with the shorter more contained plotlines that come to an end within one episode" (Hammond 76).

Within this structure the self-contained storylines are referred to as episodic, and overarching storylines as serial (Mittell; Berridge; Dunleavy). Although the episodic and serial storylines are directly interrelated, in this article I will begin by outlining how the episodic storylines (which take shape in the form of flashbacks) depict the female characters' physical growth and emotional development, before considering how the intersection of these two storylines enrich a reading of female growth and development across the first two seasons of *OUaT*.

Part One: Magical Time and Conflated Ages

The flashbacks used to create each episodic storyline facilitate a fluid understanding of female character development and growth in youth. These flashbacks tell one episodic story per episode that is based on or related to one significant event in "Snow White." The events are depicted nonlinearly across both seasons—with each episode jumping between significant happenings in "Snow White" and in time from week to week. In the programme, the episodic storylines' self-contained plots, individually and collectively, evade chronometric measures by reducing these storylines to all but the most significant moments, by not accounting for the time between significant happenings and by muddling age categories, with actors playing (increasingly) younger versions of their television characters. In not chronicling the passing of time, the fairy world alternatively uses what I refer to as magical time. Magical time takes shape in the absence of a linear, measured retelling, alternatively using characters' (changing or changed) relationships, references to significant events and costume changes to establish loose timelines.

For example, Regina's marriage to Snow White's father is a pivotal event in her character history, which helps to position other flashbacks (pre- or post-marriage). In this way, while each episode contains its own independent plotline, a general timeline takes shape based on the flashback's incorporation of, reference to or ignorance of significant events.

Magical time, hinged around significant happenings, does not detail the space/gaps between moments, making it difficult to accurately determine how much chronometric time has passed and whether (or by how much) characters have aged. Consequently, magical time is not an ordered and chronological temporal experience, but takes shape through the events and relationships that cumulatively create the story of a character's life.

The episodic storylines, condensed to display only the most significant events, dramatise and intensify the events and relationships that make up magical time. This intensification and directness of focus lends immediacy to the transformative moments that shape the characters' histories. An example of this is seen when Regina begins to transform into a villain in "The Stable Boy" (1.18). Her character change occurs over five flashbacks, ranging in length from 2 minutes 49 seconds to 8 minutes 10 seconds. When added together the flashbacks consist of 24 minutes 7 seconds of screen time across the entire episode. While Regina's transformation seemingly occurs over several days within the fairy world, the time that elapses between these days is unclear. As such, the flashbacks' screen time, and the framing, focus and use of magical time give the impression that her first steps towards evil occurred over a brief period.

Similarly Snow White's transformation from an elitist, spoiled child into a "good" person in "The Queen is Dead" (2.15) occurs over five flashbacks amounting to 10 minutes 52 seconds of screen time and occurring over what appears to be a couple of days within the fairy world. The individual flashbacks are shorter and range between 1 minute 59 seconds and 3 minutes 30 seconds. Although Snow White's metamorphosis may occur over a shorter period than Regina's, both transformations appear sudden given the episodic stories' confined time frames. In detaching characters' histories from chronometric measurements of time and reducing their pasts to all but the most significant happenings, the closed episodic

structure makes the characters seem pliable and easily influenced by the events and people around them in youth.

Magical time also enables the programme to account for character development at the same time that exact chronometric measures of age/ageing is muddled. The different stages of Regina's character development are visually coded through the contrast between Regina's evil and good character roles. In flashbacks that occur after she has married and murdered Snow White's father, she wears red and/or black gothic couture with dark lipsticks, thick fake eyelashes, thick eyeliner and red or fuchsia eye shadows. Her body is also sexualised in costumes that exhibit her bust line, reveal a bare back or hug her form. The gothic stylisation of her character points to her transformation into a villain. In contrast, when a young, unwed Regina is first introduced in "The Stable Boy" she wears light colored, buttoned up riding clothes, her hair is softly pulled back and braided, and her makeup is natural. Though played by the same actress, her simple appearance disconnects her from her identity as the evil queen, coding her as young and innocent. Her portrayal of a young Regina situates "The Stable Boy" earlier within her history and the "Snow White" tale, and highlights this period as an early stage in Regina's character development.

Her relative age and development is also coded by the physical appearance of characters around her, namely her father Henry (Tony Perez). For instance, in an episode occurring after Regina's marriage, "Fruit of the Poisonous Tree" (1.11), her father has white hair, deep wrinkles on his forehead and large, defined bags under his eyes. In contrast, in "The Stable Boy" (1.18) he has salt and peppered hair that is cropped short, his forehead is smooth and while he has bags under his eyes, they are not as heavy or defined. Although Regina shows no signs of bodily ageing, the contrast between her father's age before and after Regina's marriage helps to illustrate the passing of time between her life as a youth and time as a wife.

Where this example shows how the episodic stories create a timeline for the characters' histories and development, chronometric measurements of time and physical growth are evaded as "The Stable Boy" (1.18) fails to depict Regina as either an adolescent or young adult. Initially, her father's (relative) youth, and her unwed status in "The Stable Boy" may lead one to classify her as an adolescent. The episode further supports this notion by revealing that she lives with her parents and has her educational lessons arranged by her mother, drawing attention to her (economic and social) dependence—a cultural, social and institutional condition associated with adolescence (Driscoll 49–52; Rutter 7). However, this reading is problematised by the casting of the physically mature 34 year-old actress Parrilla as Regina, and by Regina's mother Cora's (Barbara Hershey) complaint that Regina is "becoming an old maid" while all the other "girls" her age have married. Consequently, the contradictions between her position as a dependent (i.e., adolescent), her mother's remarks about her ageing status in contrast with other "girls," and her physicality as a 34 year-old actress make it difficult to assign and clearly associate Regina with a specific age or age category within these flashbacks.

Similarly, childhood and adolescence is also muddled in the flashbacks. For example, when first introduced to Young Snow White (Bailee Madison) in "The Stable Boy" (1.18), the then 12 year-old Madison assumes a particularly young appearance as her full cheeks, round face and her costuming codes her for youth and innocence—wearing small flowers in her partially down and curly hair, and a white and pink dress. The episode takes place years after the death of Young Snow White's mother (Eva; Rena Sofer), seemingly mirroring adaptations where Snow White's mother dies in childbirth, and the evil queen becomes her stepmother before her seventh birthday. Although this similarity might suggest that Young Snow White is a child, her child status is subsequently problematised in "The Queen is Dead" (2.15) when the now 13 year-old Madison plays a younger version of Young Snow

White. Madison's physical embodiment of a younger Snow White is convoluted in the episode as Madison's character is coded for youth through her childish pink dress and Eva's presence, while Madison appears physically older with a thinned and slightly matured face. Eva's presence in "The Queen is Dead" suggest that the episodic telling occurs earlier in Snow White's history, and more importantly, earlier than "The Stable Boy," an episodic telling in which Eva is said to have been dead for a number of years. As Young Snow White is coded as a child in "The Stable Boy," she would assumedly be even younger in "The Queen is Dead." Yet, Madison's matured facial features inhibit this reading.

Her older appearance, and the episode's plotline, which centers around various rights-of-passage: namely, her birthday, her crowning, her mother's sudden death and her new royal responsibilities, seemingly represents her transition into adolescence (though her age is never specified). As such, when she meets Regina years later, as portrayed in "The Stable Boy" (1.18), she should be clearly established in her teens. However, as detailed above, in "The Stable Boy" (1.18) she is coded as a child. In making use of magical time and by muddling age categories, these episodic storylines challenge dominant chronological accounts of time and ageing as it is commonly understood in contemporary Western society, whilst rooting female characters' emotional development in significant life happenings and lived experiences that occur regardless of characters' ages. Further, the programme problematises the notion that the body can be used as a clear measure for growth, or that age can inform character development. In this way, these episodic tellings account for a level of fluidity within the female form, as the divisions between childhood, adolescence and young adulthood are muddled.

These episodes, though disconnected in terms of their central plotlines, are united by the "Snow White" tale and by the understanding that these stories collectively detail and define the characters' histories. In centering both characters' emotional development on lived

experiences that occur independently of age categories, the programme shifts its focus away from adaptations that center on the queen's fear of ageing and of being replaced by a young girl.³ This is not to say that the women are not in conflict. Alternatively, as illustrated below, their character development continues to put them in opposing roles, mimicking the angel/devil representations that commonly occur in "Snow White" adaptations.

Part Two: Female Development as a Result of Lived Experiences in Youth

In addition to providing a back-story and guide to the characters' development, the flashbacks rationalise characters' behaviors and relationships in the present (i.e., in Storybrooke/the serial storyline). For Snow White, her identity as a self-sacrificing, caring person is accredited (by both Snow White and Prince Charming) to the lesson she learned in the build up to her mother's death and her subsequent crowning ("The Queen is Dead," 2.15). Although it is difficult to say whether her crowning represents her movement out of childhood for the reasons outlined above, it does symbolise a moment of character development as Snow White leaves behind spoiled tendencies and assumes the "good" identity she portrays as an adult within the serial storyline.

In these flashbacks, Young Snow White's character is seemingly in need of social and moral guidance when she cruelly scolds a servant for trying on the crown set aside for her upcoming coronation. Though the woman is significantly older than Young Snow White, played by then 60 year-old Lesley Nicol, Young Snow White treats her as an inferior, talking down to her and showing her physical and social superiority by lifting her chin, and stating, "It's not for a servant [...] servants don't wear crowns." Young Snow White is revealed as classist, elitist and mean, a representation that stands at odds with the previous 36 episodes that depict her as kind hearted. The contrast between her behavior in the previous episodes and Young Snow White's cruelty diverges from the mythology of Western childhood

innocence, which as Heywood notes stems from “the sentimental nonsense surrounding the supposedly pure and innocent child of the Victorian era” (9). In disconnecting youth from innate purity, the programme reimagines “the child” and invites a narrative about Snow White’s transformation into a kind character.

This narrative is immediately instigated by her mother’s, Eva’s, disapproval and chides, which reinforce the notion that a good leader serves the people by acting fairly, putting other’s needs first, and by recognising that “we are all the same.” Although Eva’s assertions of equality stand at odds with the visual contrast between her and Young Snow White’s jeweled clothing and the servant’s simple dress, Eva nonetheless socially educates Young Snow White and prompts character growth. This is evident when, in the episode’s final flashback, Young Snow White gains her mother’s approval by showing the ability to become a benevolent leader and act in the name of “goodness.” Further, as Young Snow White’s mother dies and she is left with a new level of responsibility, she is forced to emotionally mature to preserve her mother’s legacy and rule as her mother instructed.

The events in this episodic storyline, while explaining her development into a heroine, also rationalise her behavior and actions in the serial storyline—as Snow White notes, “I’ve played the same role my entire life, hold on to goodness, that’s what my mother taught me” (“The Queen is Dead,” 2.15). In this way, although the flashback’s plotline is confined to one episode, the content nonetheless feeds into and engages with the serial storyline. The intertwining of the two storylines (episodic and serial) facilitates the dynamic development of the female characters’ identities and roles, as their character formation is explored in, through and between youth and adulthood. More specifically, Snow White’s comments highlight the circularity of her character development by reflecting Lynne Segal’s assertion that,

Ageing is neither simply linear, nor is it any single discrete process when, in our minds, we race around, moving seamlessly between childhood, old age and back again. There are ways in which we can, and do, bridge different ages, psychically, all the time. (19)

In holding on to her mother's lesson and seeking to embody her mother's values in and throughout youth and adulthood, Snow White's remarks and the interweaving of the episodic and serial storylines serve to question prevailing understandings of chronometric growth and development by highlighting how the past and present resonate in unison when considered beyond a linear and ordered temporality.

While on the one hand the temporal jumps enabled by the flashbacks facilitate a circular and fluid reading of characters' (developing) identities, the programme nonetheless feeds into and further supports dominant discourses that position childhood, or in this case youth, as central to the formation of functional adults. In terms of Snow White, the programme positions spectators to read the selfless conduct Snow White learns to embody in "The Queen is Dead" (2.15) as ideal, despite her personal losses and struggles, as the strength of her mother's lesson leads her back to happiness, inclusion and reward. In rooting Snow White's "success" and her heroic behavior in her character transformation (i.e., emotional development) in youth, the programme positions this stage of development as fundamental to her (functional) adult identity.

Further, as an exploration of this character change is confined to 10 minutes 52 seconds of screen time in one episode, the limited attention given to Young Snow White suggests that the importance of her transformation has less to do with how she existed and lived as a youth, but how a specific experience (her mother's death and her crowning) informed her identity as an adult across the serial storyline. In this way, the programme reaffirms Bruhm and Hurley's, and Holland's assertion that narratives about childhood (or in this case youth) are often stories about adulthood, adult society and the formation of functional or dysfunctional adults (Bruhm and Hurley xii, xiv).

Like Snow White, Regina's emotional development in youth dictates her identity as an adult. Her character formation in youth is specifically shaped by Cora's selfish, controlling

and abusive behavior; the death of Regina's first true love Daniel (Noah Bean) at the hands of Cora; and Snow White's betrayal when she mistakenly reveals Daniel and Regina's relationship to Cora. As Snow White's betrayal functions as the final catalyst in Regina's transformation from a good to bad character ("The Stable Boy," 1.18), *OUaT*'s characterisation of the queen differs from preceding versions where the queen's villainy is motivated by her vanity (Zipes *The Enchanted Screen* 115) and by a fear of being replaced by a younger counterpart (Sale 41).

In juxtaposing Regina's history with her villainy in the serial storyline, the programme expands her story and complicates her character, creating a sympathetic and emotionally complex figure who is both victim and villain. With the spectator positioned in a higher place of knowledge—witnessing both Regina's personal and private suffering, and her abuse of other characters in Storybrooke and the fairy-tale realm—Regina's inability to cope with loss and to put the needs of others above her own, separates her from Snow White and the "good" characteristics Snow White embodies. The spectator is thus positioned to read Regina's misery, villainy and her inability to find her own happy ending, as a consequence of unresolved emotional issues with her mother and Snow White, her misplaced anger, selfishness, hate and unmitigated female power, but not, crucially, her advancing age.

Alternatively, in continuing to place the characters in oppositional roles as good and bad females, the connections drawn between Regina's traumatic experiences in youth and her villainy in adulthood further reinforce the importance of "ideal" development and education in youth. With Regina's past inhibiting her maturation into a functional and socially well-adjusted adult, like Snow White, Regina's episodic tellings speak to dominant ideologies and discourses surrounding ideal development, and the importance of youth to adulthood and adult society. Where Snow White's heroic storyline highlights the value of "proper" social education in youth, Regina's episodic tellings collectively reinforce these same values but by

functioning as a cautionary tale. Further, as the flashbacks' episodic structure lends immediacy to character transformations in youth, and in this way frame youths as malleable, the programme reinforces the importance of early social education by highlighting how easily malleable young female characters can be set astray (Regina) or kept on the "right" path (Snow White) during important moments in their development towards adulthood. While the characters' diverging paths in many ways reiterates a narrative about the rivalry between an angel and devil woman, the intersection of the past and present facilitated through the interweaving of episodic and serial storylines adapts the tale as a narrative about the importance and relevance of youth to the formation of ideal (i.e., self-sacrificing and selfless) adult female identities.

Concluding Remarks

This article determined that the interplay between *OUaT*'s structure and its adaptation of "Snow White" within multiple, interrelated storylines allows the programme to distinctly adapt "Snow White," the tale's temporal engagement, and the characters' lives before and after "happily ever after." As an audiovisual medium, television enabled the programme to corporealise female characters' experiences of growth and development on screen. However, as I demonstrated, the use of magical time muddles depictions of the characters' physical growth and opens the programme to non-chronometric readings of the characters' temporal experiences and development. Further, as the interweaving of episodic and serial storylines links the past and the present, giving the characters layered identities of all the selves they had been, the programme challenges chronometric accounts of ageing.

OUaT centrally speaks to dominant Western perceptions surrounding "ideal" emotional development by reinforcing the importance of youth to the formation of functioning adults. In so doing, the characters' oppositional roles within the episodic

flashbacks informs what “ideal” female behavior and development looks like, framing the ideal female as self-sacrificial and benevolent. This depiction demands a level of perfectionism from its female characters as fallible women are presented as villains, and as narratives of self-improvement see female characters seek to eliminate personal flaws to embody a selfless and self-sacrificing role.

Nonetheless, the programme’s complex structure moves the tale beyond its traditionally static/one-dimensional representation of female characters—giving depth and complexity to the female form through characters’ emotional development and the programme’s temporal engagement. It highlights the complex ways the tale can be reimagined/adapted within television, as well as the way contemporary tellings can speak to and reiterate dominant social narratives within Western society.

Notes

¹ When referring to Western understandings of chronometric time, I am referring to time that is marked by regular change. As Ros Jennings and Eva Krainitzki note, this concept of time has been dominant in 21st century Western society, and has often overshadowed other understandings of time (182), such as experiential (i.e., felt) time; Augustinian time (time that takes shape through an understanding and overlap of the past, present and future; see Baars; Jennings and Krainitzki); and Kairotic time (which “emerges between past and future, beyond cycles of time, notions of finite and infinite in a felt moment of insight”; Crowther, Smythe and Spence). When referring to chronometric age or ageing, I am referring to “a measurement of the amount of time that has passed since [a] person was born” (Baars 147).

² My use of the word “youth” refers to childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. I have grouped these stages, because, as I will demonstrate, the programme blurs age categories and flattens generational divides, making it difficult to distinguish between these age groups.

Within the programme the characters' youth is similarly marked by innocence; continuous and dramatic emotional development; a belief in and hope for "happily ever afters;" and an understanding that their future has yet to be written and as such defined.

³ For examples see: Giambattista Basile's (1634) "The Young Slave;" J.K.A. Musäus' (1782) "Richilde;" James and Joseph Robins' (1827) "Snow- Drop;" Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm's (1857) "Snow White;" Lucy and Walter Crane's (1882) "Snow White;" Joseph Jacobs' (1892) "Gold-Tree and Silver-Tree;" Angela Carter's (1979) "The Snow Child;" Michael Cohn's *Snow White: A Tale of Terror*; Tarsem Singh's (2012) *Mirror Mirror*; Rupert Sanders' (2012) *Snow White and the Huntsman*

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