One Life is Enough; Vulnerability and the Modern Fairy Tale Hero

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"However great the benefit of inheriting a tidbit handed down from father to son, young people with industry will prefer ingenuity even if the gains are hard won" (Perrault). That bit of wisdom was penned by Charles Perrault and it is meant as the explicitly stated moral at the end of the original "Puss in Boots." Perrault, being born into an upper-class family, sought very much to refine French culture and so he wrote many children's stories with morals designed to do just that: to socialize children into a more refined way of thinking and being. The moral above suggests two things: 1. that the story of "Puss in Boots" was targeted squarely at young boys and 2. Perrault believed that intelligence, cunning, resourcefulness, and ruthlessness were more valuable than inherited wealth. It is ideas such as these that informed the view of masculinity that was pervasive at the time: that ambition, performance, and social mobility were the only true measures of a man. However, more contemporary representations seem to be shifting. In the recent film Puss in Boots: The Last Wish, we see Puss starting as the callous, vain, ruthless person we know but slowly learning that self-worth

comes from personal growth and not external validation. In both versions, the theme of masculinity is explored through Puss, but each reflects different cultural values. Perrault's Puss is a trickster who achieves dominance through cunning and manipulation, reinforcing values associated with a more traditional view of masculinity. The Puss portrayed in The Last Wish flips the script with a portrayal of masculinity that comes from self-awareness, relationships, and accepting vulnerability, underscoring how values have shifted from dominance and self-presentation to emotional intelligence and personal growth (Puss in Boots: The Last Wish).

Perrault's Puss begins meaning nothing. He is an inherited burden, so much so that the man who inherits him considers cooking him up and eating him. While deciding on his course of action, Puss interjects and tells the man that if he lets him live then he will bring him vast fortunes. This appears to be symbolic of a system; the cold reality at play that if a boy doesn't produce and provide, eventually he will die impoverished and deserve it. As the story moves forward, Puss does nothing but lie and manipulate his way into "winning" every encounter that he has for the sake of his master. He lies his way into getting him to look like a noble; he manipulates other nobles into opening up to the possibility that his master may be one of them. The

message to the implied child reader is clear: if you are smart, you can disregard morality in pursuit of success.

From the opening of the film, the audience is told that The Last Wish is a fairy tale. As the film begins, those are the first words the audience sees: “This is a fairy tale” (Puss in Boots: The Last Wish). Of course, then, the audience is told that the main character will learn a valuable lesson, and so too will the viewer. At the beginning, Puss in The Last Wish is larger than life. He has a crowd of people who adore him despite the fact that he is an outlaw, literally singing a song with lyrics like “Who's your favorite fearless hero?” and “Who has never been touched by a blade? Puss in Boots is never afraid!” (Puss in Boots: The Last Wish 4:12). After slaying a giant that is assaulting the town he is in, he is humbled. While gloating, a bell falls on his head and he is crushed to death. Fear not, though, cats have nine lives, so he is basically okay, right? The realization slowly dawns on him that he has died eight times in various ways, each related to his own bravado, carelessness, and toxic masculinity cheating at poker and getting ripped apart by3 the dogs he was playing with, running with the bulls and stopping to hit on a woman, lifting weights and being too proud to have a spotter, that sort of thing (10:02; Puss in Boots: The Last Wish). It dawns on Puss that he needs to retire and live out his remaining time quietly, but he has no one to go to because all

of his relationships are hollow and meaningless. The film's comedic approach to the various deaths of Puss in Boots highlights how meaningless they truly were. Puss never really valued them, and now that he is confronted with the reality of the situation, the child viewer is shown the value of self-awareness. If Puss had the awareness to value his lives, to foster relationships, and to seek meaning, he would not be in the difficult position he finds himself in at the beginning of the film, a place where individuals find themselves at one point or another. Rock bottom. Perrault's 17th-century adaptation truly has young male audiences believe that if they work hard, undercut the other guy, and be the smartest guy in the room they will find success, as if success is truly the most important thing in the world; whereas The Last Wish shows its audience that the true value of life is in the self (Puss in Boots: The Last Wish).

Both representations of Puss in Boots have a clear villain that acts in direct opposition to the character. These villains act as the antithesis to the hero and embody the negative traits that our protagonist must confront. In Perrault's version, we have an evil sorcerer who lives in a far-off castle, which looms threateningly off in the distance as a constant reminder of a seemingly insurmountable challenge that Puss will have to face. When he finally does face the sorcerer, however, Puss tricks him by causing him to shrink himself down into the size of a mouse,

and Puss kills him quickly and viciously by swallowing him whole. I would like to invite you to consider: what exactly was the sorcerer's crime to deserve such a cruel punishment? To deserve Puss encroaching upon his castle and slaying him without a second thought? He was in the way. He was in the way of Puss wanting to accomplish his own goal of ensuring that his owner became wealthy (and thereby saving his own hide in the process). In The Last Wish, we have Jack Horner, a self-professed "irredeemable monster" who actively uses magical items from fairy tales traditionally used to conjure wonder in the hearts of young readers and to symbolize virtues (like the phoenix and the hand of King Midas) as weapons tools to get him closer to his ultimate goal of controlling all magic in the world so no one else can have any, as evidenced by his line: "You know, I never had much as a kid. Just loving parents, stability, and a mansion, and a thriving baked goods enterprise for me to inherit. Useless crap like that. But once I get my wish, I will finally have the one thing that will make me happy. All the magic in the world. For me. No one else gets any" (Puss in Boots: The Last Wish 1:04:52).

In The Last Wish, it is clear that the villain is meant as a foil to Puss. Both are the same in many ways: selfish, vain, and ambitious. The main difference, however, is in their capacity for empathy. Jack lacks the empathy he requires in order to connect

with others, looking at his gang “The Baker's Dozen” as expendable. At one point, while everyone is in a sentient forest, Jack carelessly pulls out what he believes to be a “magical locust” capable of mass destruction, hoping to wipe out the forest and everyone in it. He discovers it is actually a Jiminy Cricket-like figure who calls himself Jack's conscience, to which Jack replies, “Wow. I really did overpack.” In contrast, Puss learns that his friends Perrito and Kitty Softpaws are his greatest strength, as evidenced by his final confrontation with Death and his refusal to give up. Jack Horner gets his wish but is eventually beaten by Puss, Kitty Softpaws, and Goldie. Perrault's Puss acted decisively and brutally out of self-interest, encouraging the child reader to dominate those in their way and to always seek to outmaneuver others. The Last Wish teaches young boys that the real path to strength is through empathy and by building relationships so that they may build you (Puss in Boots: The Last Wish).

It is sad to see that rhetoric around manliness and masculinity has remained largely unchanged. Young men today are exposed to a lot of messaging around being an “alpha” or a “sigma” male. They are repeatedly told by pop culture and social media influencers that in order to be a real man, you need to live for yourself and disregard the needs of others. Healthier representations of masculinity have the courage to say what Puss

in Boots: The Last Wish says: that for young men, true masculinity is what you make it. It comes from knowing yourself. It comes from growing as a person and coming at the world on your own terms. The Last Wish has the bravery to reject outdated tropes and tell young boys that they don't need to be the strongest, the boldest, or the loudest to be worthy. What matters is who they are when they take off the boots and bury the legend. In that quiet place, maybe for the first time, they can hear the truth: that one life is enough, especially when it's shared (Puss in Boots: The Last Wish).

Works Cited

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