Magic, Myth, and Metaphor in Jean Cocteau’s *la Belle et la Bête*

Jean Cocteau stands as one of the single most intriguing characters of the 20th Century. Born into a wealthy Parisian family, Cocteau began writing poetry in his early teenage years. From this time onward, no matter what art Cocteau pursued, whether it theatre, poetry, or cinema, he described his sole identity as that of a poet. In his films, most notably *Le Sang d’un poète, La Belle et la Bête*, and *Orphee*, Cocteau’s poetic vision permeated his work.

Cocteau’s films were deeply personal and he was one of the few directors of his time who injected his own intimate vision into his work. A true *auteur*, Cocteau went against the grain of popular, realist films during the post-war era and tenaciously held on to his vision, believing in the importance of his work despite the initial resistance that faced it.

The films and writings of Cocteau are distinctly Cocteau. The director stands in opposition to being connected with any kind of school, cause or principle. Thus, Cocteau himself exemplifies his own conception of the poet: a man completely free and pure from the forces around him, a man transcending classification or definition (Oxenhandler 15). Cocteau begins the film by asking for a certain “ naïveté” from his audience. The director’s fondness for childlike faith perhaps implies that perhaps Cocteau was attempting to fend of criticism of his work. For Cocteau, poetry had to be “felt,” not analyzed. Thus, he wanted his viewers to accept his work with the simple faith of a child and not question it (Popkin 106). His films were deeply personal and reflective of his desire to infuse his films with his childhood. Of his *la Belle et la Bête*, Cocteau has said, “gradually, I am coaxing my myths and childhood memories back again. If only I have managed to fix them onto the screen” (Pauly 88).
Cocteau’s 1946 interpretation of the 18th Century fairy tale, *Beauty and the Beast*, is a film that captures his own poetic vision. The spectacular cinematography and lighting of the film contribute to its sense of fantasy, and Cocteau’s changes to the original fairy tale function to elevate the story to a higher meaning.

The question as to why Cocteau made the specific decision to reinterpret this well-known fairy tale lies in his beliefs as an individual as well as the political situation that surrounded him at the time the film was made. Cocteau saw the story as what he describes “a fairy-tale without fairies.” He criticized the tendency for fairy tales of the time to include winged characters as an effort to simply cater to its audience, claiming that “genuine poetry,” would not allow for this escape. “Genuine poetry has no use for evasion. What it wants is *invasion*, that is, that the soul be invaded and objects which, just because they don’t present a winged appearance, impel it to plunge deep into itself” (Fraigneau 64). Cocteau wanted to create something simple, yet something intriguing. By refusing to adopt the film techniques of other directors at the time, Cocteau was “going against the grain of the bourgeois taste of the establishment (Humphreville).

In addition to Cocteau’s personal beliefs that motivated him to make the film, some may argue that the film was a product of the post-war environment it was created in. The film opens with Cocteau asking for a “childlike simplicity” from its viewers. Cocteau wants to engage the viewer in the world of fantasy and illusion, where anything is possible. Rebecca M. Pauly interprets this scene as showing “Coteau’s desire to recapture the mysteries, at once cruel and beautiful of a child’s creative imagination” as well as his “wish to return to the world of creative freedom and vitality which had been so crushed by World War II and the German Occupation” (Pauly 86). Morty Schiff takes a similar stance on this scene and the film as a whole, noting it as “profoundly escapist” with the intention of plunging the viewer into what Cocteau calls a “lustral
bath of childhood” (Schiff 4). While some critics view the film as escapist, others contend it has “little in common with the escapist romanticism of French cinema during the war” (Williams 63). At this time, the taste for cinema was more towards realism. Countless war films were created to help restore France’s identity, and in this climate, Cocteau’s suggestion for the film seemed irrelevant; he was initially rejected when he pitched the film to be financed. “As with his own life, Cocteau’s films were totally disengaged from the socio-political climate of the time” (Hayward 44). Thus, this argument contends that la Belle et la bête was not a response to the politics of the time, but rather, independent from it.

After Cocteau was denied funding for the film from Gaumont, he went on to approach the independent producer, André Paulvé. Though initially agreeing to finance the project, Paulvé withdrew, feeling that no one would want to watch an actor who was disguised as a beast. It was Marais, the film’s main character who played both Beast and Avenant, who finally persuaded Paulvé to watch some of the pre-production rushes. Paulvé was moved by the magical scene where Belle first appears at the Beast’s castle, floating gracefully through the corridor, and agreed to finance the film (Hayward 45).

The film was developed in difficult conditions. After the war, France was struggling to get back on its feet. Everything was in scarce supply, from camera equipment to fabrics for costumes. The manor used for Belle’s house was located near a military airfield and the sound of planes constantly interfered with the filming. The crew even encountered difficulty finding a deer for the film, as the wholesale game markets in Paris had gone on strike at the time of the film’s production. The cast and crew also encountered a multitude of health problems throughout filming. Cocteau suffered from severe eczema, the intensity of which caused Cocteau to return to opium, an addiction he had developed in previous years. The company’s success in overcoming
these obstacles can be largely attributed to the sense of camaraderie between the cast and crew. Cocteau wrote in one of his journals, “I wonder whether these days of hard work aren’t the most delicious of my life. Full of friendship, affectionate disagreement, laughter, profitable from every moment” (Steegmuller 459-460). Although Cocteau described the filming process as one in which, “everything went wrong,” he went on to say in an interview in *The Art of Fiction* that “all these things contributed to the virtue of the film” (28). In his text, *The History of a Poet’s Age*, Wallace Fowlie comments that the journal which Cocteau wrote during the difficult filming of La Belle et la bête shows his “exceptional capacity for work and his will to overcome all the obstacles that are concomitant with work in the theatre and with the production of films” (Fowlie 137). Cocteau dreaded the final moments of filming, where those who had worked and lived together dispersed in different directions. Cocteau compares the process of filmmaking to a dream. He says, “A tired man wants to sleep and dream. A man who is resting looks back to that active dream, cinematography” (Fraigeneau 29).

Cocteau saw in a somewhat straightforward tale, the opportunity to inject his voice as both poet and director. Film was an ideal medium for Cocteau. The established poet, also an artist, had an understanding of the cinema as an “art of images.” For Cocteau, who considered himself foremost a poet, the camera was a powerful tool for “projecting before an audience something like the visual processes of poetry” (Oxenhandler 14). His camera work in *la Belle et la Bête* is a testament to this idea. The cinematic effects of the camera, coupled with the deeper metaphors that lie within the film, can be seen as “visual poetry.” Oxenhandler sees the film, with its continuity of theme and technique, as “a true illumination of the poet’s vision of experience” (18).
With his tricks of the camera, Cocteau brings the viewer into a world of fantasy. His use of visual metaphors reveals the true nature of the characters in the film, and the power of magic. By giving life to inanimate objects and transforming the identity of his characters with tricks of the camera, Cocteau shows his incredible skill at redefining reality. “With the power of the camera in the film, from controlling images to shaping reality, one may view the series of transformations as *magica ex machine*. The camera is the ultimate device of control” (Galef 104).

One of the first notable scenes of magic is when Belle’s father enters the castle of the Beast. As he comes to the door, his shadow grows and gives the sense of fantasy and illusion. This technique was merely the result of a photographic effect from an arc light, yet it has the power to compel the viewer to believe in its magic (Galef 98). As Belle’s father enters the Beasts’ chambers, the doors open magically before him. He walks through a hall, where arms come out of the walls, holding candelabras. The arms twist and move magically, seeming to react to the presence of the father. Similarly, the heads on the mantle of the fireplace come alive, opening their eyes and turning to look at this stranger in the Beast’s castle. “Cocteau’s controlling idea, the mobility of the supposedly immobile, is what creates real magic” (99). As the father sits down to pour himself a drink at the Beast’s dining table, a disembodied arm suddenly comes into the frame and pours the drink for him. This action startles the viewer not only because of the fantastic magical nature of the event, but also because the viewer is caught in a close-up shot. Cocteau thus engages the viewer, bringing them fully into the world of fantasy.

Beyond creating a shock value and alternate reality for the viewer, Cocteau’s use of magic serves a greater purpose: it communicates a truth about its characters. In the hands of the
protagonists, magic is beautiful. Conversely, in the hands of the film’s morally corrupt characters, magic is ugly...even deadly.

When Belle returns from Beast’s castle, she is wearing a beautiful magic necklace and one of her stepsisters expresses her admiration for the object. In an act of generosity, Belle gives the necklace to her stepsister, but once it touches the hands of this evil character, the necklace turns to burnt rope. This is one example of what David Galef identifies as “dematerialization and transformation,” one of the three forms of magic in the film that contribute to its sense of fantasy (Galef 97).

Another memorable element of magic in the film is the Beast’s horse, Magnificent. The horse functions in the film to transport the characters between the world of fantasy and the world of reality. One needs only to whisper, “Go where I am going,” and the horse magically knows the path to follow. Magnificent’s large, glowing white presence contributes to the magical feel of the horse. The camera angles, looking up from slightly below the horse, seem to magnify the horse’s significance. Additionally, the gates at both the Beast’s castle and at Belle’s home open magically for the horse, showing its power in both the world of fantasy and the world of reality.

The magic glove similarly functions to magically transport Belle between the world of fantasy and the world of reality. When Belle pleads the Beast to permit her to leave in order to see her father, the Beast gives her his magic glove. He explains to her that, by putting on the glove on her right hand, she can magically transport to wherever she wants to go. As she puts on the glove, the camera seems to magically dissolve Belle from the screen. At once, she appears in her home, seeming to come organically out of the wall. The camera thus gives magical powers to an otherwise ordinary object. It has no real significance until the magic tricks of the camera give it its magical abilities.
One of the most beautiful scenes from the film is when Belle returns to her father and magically cries diamonds by his bedside. This illusion of the film can be interpreted as a metaphor for its “multifaceted surface created out of simple materials” (Galef 102). A direct contrast to the beauty of this scene, emphasizing the beauty of fantasy and the ugliness of reality, is when Belle’s sisters rub onions against their eyes in an effort to force tears and deceive Belle into staying at the house. We are taken out of the fantasy world, and it is clear that we are now back in the world of reality (103).

Perhaps one of the most important elements of magic in the film is the magic mirror. The mirror, which we first encounter when Belle enters her room in the Beast’s castle for the first time, magically shows the image of Belle’s ailing father. The image of her father is brought into the frame, and the viewer sees the scene as Belle is seeing it. When the mirror is brought out of the fantasy world and into Belle’s home, Belle’s sisters try to use it. Each are met with an ugly representation of themselves: one sister as an old woman, and the other as a monkey.

Caroline Sheaffer-Jones notes the importance of the mirror in her article, Fixing the Gaze. The identities of the characters in the film are brought into question in each of their reflections in the mirror. As stated earlier, the reflections of the two sisters do not reflect their external appearances, but rather, their suggested internal nature. What is more complex and perhaps more powerful is the mirror’s ability to confuse image and reality. When Belle has been home for more than a week, longer than her promise to the Beast, she gazes into the mirror to find her own reflection morphing into that of the beast and then back into her own. This blurring of images in the mirror’s reflection suggests that there are perhaps blurred identities within the characters in the film. Sheaffer-Jones raises the issue that Belle may indeed be considered “beastly” for not following through in her promise to return to the castle within a week’s time.
(Sheaffer-Jones 368). Thus, her reflection suggests that though she is Beauty, she may also contain qualities of that of a Beast. The identities of the characters, then, are not fixed, but rather, constantly in flux. Characters continually take on the role of one another: Belle takes on the image of the Beast when she acts in a beastly way, and similarly, Avenant takes on the physical image of the Beast as he breaks into the Diana pavilion in an attempt to steal its riches.

Another element of la Belle et la Bête to consider is its close links to several Greek and Roman myths. Cocteau was drawn to mythology; he had what Rebecca Pauly calls, “lifelong generic attraction to fable and myth” (Pauly 86). In Pauly’s article, “Beauty and the Beast: From Fable to Film,” she notes the specific elements in Cocteau’s film that parallel Greek and Roman mythology and its relation to the magic of the film.

We see the Beast’s glowing temple of Diana (the goddess of the Hunt in Roman mythology), as he shows the temple to Belle before she departs back to her ailing father. An overhead shot filmed in the darkness emphasizes the seemingly magical qualities of the temple; it glows and sparkles against the dark night. We later see Ludovic and Avenant breaking through the glass roof and entering the temple in an attempt to steal its riches. As Avenant breaks the glass, he exclaims, “Glass is just glass.” In this way, he is denying the powers of magic. Earlier, during a conversation between Avenant and Ludovic, Ludovic raises concerns that the two are dealing with magic powers. In response, Avenant says, “I don’t believe in magic powers.” Ironically, it is magic that takes the life of Ludovic. As he descends through the window on the roof, the statue of Diana suddenly comes alive. She turns her body, and we see her pull an arrow back in slow motion. She strikes Avenant in the back with her arrow, and before he falls to the ground, his face and body magically take on the appearance of the Beast.
Cocteau may have also gained inspiration from the myth of Venus, who falls in love with the deformed Vulcan. Additionally, the film may have connections to the tale of Chaucer’s Wife of Bath from the *Canterbury Tales*. The story suggests that when the marriage is a happy one, each partner will then look beautiful in the other’s eyes. In the final scenes of the film, we see Belle desperately trying to bring Beast to life. When she looks at him with love, the Beast is transformed into man. Consistent with the tale, in the film, “even the Beast can be the mate of whom someone has always been dreaming, searching” (Popkin 104).

Another parallel is that of the story of Perseus and Andromeda. In the myth, Perseus rides a white horse, triumphing over trials, to marry Andromeda. In another example, the idea of the “rider-less white horse” has roots in an old Breton legend. Cocteau’s inclusion and distinct representation of Magnificent may have been a resulting inspiration from these two myths. Cocteau is, in a sense, “weaving together these ancient myths” (Pauly 88).

By empowering the mythological elements of the film, Cocteau is bringing these myths to life. Old fables and myths are suddenly living realities within the film. By giving the magic of life to legends of the past, Cocteau is again emphasizing the importance of believing and blurring the lines between myth and truth.

Several critics have suggested the running metaphor in the film of the poet as Beast. Michael Popkin suggests that Cocteau has identified with the monster. In the film, the Beast explains the reason behind the curse that has been bestowed upon him: “My parents didn’t believe in fairies, so the fairies punished them through me as a result. I could only be saved by the look of love.” Herein lies a message that Cocteau has been communicating from the beginning of the film, “adults have to accept things with the same ample faith that children have” (Popkin 104). As a poet, Cocteau sees himself in a similar position as the beast. He is
misunderstood by those around them. In the original version of the Beauty and the Beast, the Beast hides his mind, and those around him think he is unintelligent because he cannot communicate with them. In Cocteau’s film, Cocteau makes the deliberate decision to show the Beast in a situation where he is trying to explain himself. As the Beast stands before Belle with smoking hands, covered in blood, it is clear that he wants to explain himself and be accepted for his mind. This is what Popkin considers to be a metaphor for Cocteau’s idea of the struggle of the poet: “The poet does show his mind but is nevertheless misunderstood by the dullards around him” (107).

Popkin also suggests that, with the way the events carry out in the final scene, Cocteau is implying that the poet must die in order to be appreciated. Belle does not see beyond the Beast’s appearance until it is too late, the Beast is dead. Popkin says that, “For Cocteau, the only happy ending possible is immortality. The audience’s reaction to the transformation of Beast into Prince is similar to the public’s reaction to the posthumous glory of the poet: now we appreciate the monster” (Popkin 108). When watching the scene in this film, one does not really consider that the Beast in his original form has died. It is easy to forget that tragic reality when looking at the Beast in his new, attractive form. Although we presume that it is still the Beast’s internal self within the new outward shell of a prince, we must remember that the Beast has still in some sense, died. The Beast, who is unappreciated and misunderstood until his death, is much like the poet or artist who is seen as strange, frightening, even “monsterly” during his lifetime and then adored as a creative genius after his death.

Sheaffer-Jones also suggests the possibility for the metaphor of the poet as the Beast. When describing the final scene of the transformation of the Beast and Avenant, Jones says, “The poet rises up in new form as prince. The poet as prince would be born from what appears to
be the tricky interweaving of the characters of Beast and Avenant, more or less beastly, more or less beautiful” (Sheaffer-Jones 371). Thus, Sheaffer-Jones sees the poet as a combination of both beautiful and monstrous identities. She also adds the point that Cocteau’s appearance in the beginning of the film in the blackboard scene, asking for the childlike belief from his audience, parallels the Beast’s emphasis on the importance of believing.

The final scene, where the transformation of the Beast and Avenant takes place, is one that has been heavily debated amongst critics. After the Beast (now in the image of Avenant) rises to his feet in a swift, almost magical motion, he flies upward with Beauty wrapped in his cloak. Although cinematically beautiful, with Belle and the Beast in his new form seeming to float through the air, this stylized ending has been criticized for being “anticlimactic” after the miraculous transformation that has just taken place (Galef 105).

Another interpretation is that the “happy ending” of the film leads us to believe that Cocteau sees the happiness of the poet as only being possible in fantasy. Neal Oxenhandler suggests that through the film’s ending, Cocteau is sending the message that it is self-knowledge that is the “height of moral beauty.” At the close of the film, the monster becomes beautiful, while the handsome man, Avenant, becomes a monster. “Real beauty, in other words, is moral beauty and moral beauty is self-knowledge.” Cocteau does not feel that the world will ever accept his personal reality; therefore he places the triumph of the Beast in the impossible realm of fantasy (Oxenhandler 18).

Susan Haywood notes the sense of disappointment blatantly seen on Belle’s face when the Beast turns into the prince in the final scene. Belle does not wish to go and live happily ever after—she wants more than a “marriage of reason.” What she truly desires, rather, is to be “frightened.” Haywood notes that the film’s representation of the “female agencing of desire”
had not been seen since the cinema of the 1920’s, and that the notion of equality that ran through this film ran against the popular themes of the times: “Women either died or had their dreams of independence firmly quashed” (Haywood 47). Thus, Haywood sees the final scene as a testament to Cocteau’s equal representation of a female character at a time when female characters were depicted as inferior and subservient. Belle has a voice and she states her thoughts plainly and openly, rejecting a future of purely domestic responsibility.

Cocteau was a true auteur. Over his thirty years of making films, he produced only six. Each film was deeply personal and self-reflective. In the early 1950’s, he was given auteur status by the critics writing for Cahiers du cinéma. While critics writing for this journal denounced contemporary French cinema, they praised Cocteau for being a “‘film-maker’s film-maker.’” Cocteau’s films had a considerable influence on the films of the French New Wave of 1958-64. Specifically, his lighting and camera angles in Cocteau’s adaptation of the Beauty and the Beast were a source of inspiration for Jean-Luc Godard’s thriller, Alphaville (1965) (Hayward 43). The opening scene of la Belle et la Bête, where Cocteau writes his name on the blackboard, is a scene that promotes Cocteau as a true auteur: he is fully “hands on” with his work (Williams 65).

In an interview with Andrew Fraigneau, Cocteau describes his conception of a genuine work of art. He says that a work of art must protect itself from “vulgar pawing, which tarnishes and disfigures it.” Cocteau goes on to say, “The less it’s understood, the slower it opens its petals, the later it will fade. A work that doesn’t keep its secrets and surrenders itself too soon exposes itself to the risk of withering away, leaving only a dead stalk” (Fraigneau 30). Certainly, the films of Cocteau have “opened their petals slowly,” and, as he predicted, they have yet to fade. Cocteau’s films stand as cinematic masterpieces…pieces of art that deeply reflected Cocteau’s own philosophies as director and poet. Cocteau was one of the few directors of his
time to come upon a business and make it an art, something that puts him as a director “head and shoulders above the rest” (Oxenhandler 19).

Considered by many to be one of the most original directors in history, ironically, Cocteau detests the concept of originality. He saw this concept as the “invention of new tricks merely for their own sake, which might give a superficial pleasure to the ‘elite,’” a class whose false values he hated (Crosland 210). Cocteau is more than a writer and poet. He is a personality. “There is a mingling of conscious and unconscious acting about him that fascinates everyone who meets him” (211).

In his interview with Andre Fraigneau, Cocteau is asked if he is waiting for some kind of outside inspiration for his next films. He replies, “No, one should say ‘expiration,’ not ‘inspiration.’ It is from our reserves, from our night that things come to us. The problem is to discover it. We are merely its archaeologists” (Fraigneau 131). Thus, for Cocteau, creative inspiration comes from within us. Perhaps this is why, for years to come, people will struggle to understand and interpret Cocteau, the mysterious, true poet of his time.
Works Cited:


http://people.wcsu.edu/mccarneyh/fva/c/La_Belle_et_la_Bete_780.html


Williams, James S. *Jean Cocteau*. Manchester [u.a.] Manchester Univ., 2006. Print.