Wake Up, Puppet Boy: Defining Boyhood Through Pinocchio

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The understanding of gender has evolved drastically over the course of human history and even more drastically within the past few years. In light of U.S. President Joe Biden's recognition of March 31 as Transgender Visibility Day, the discussion of how to understand gender identity is more important than ever. As such, how gender identity is portrayed in media plays a crucial role in the cultural understanding of gender, and no genre best encapsulates this better than fantasy. Acclaimed fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes, in his article "Why Fantasy Matters Too Much," explains that "[i]t is through fantasy that we have always sought to make sense of the world, not through reason. Reason matters, but fantasy matters more" (78). Using fictional works, though most notably the fantasy genre, as a tool for expressing real-world ideas, allows for broad audiences to use those works to develop a better understanding of their world. In regard to gender, this can be a powerful tool.

Yet, one of the most gender-centric characters has been largely neglected when examined from a gender studies perspective: Pinocchio. The Adventures of Pinocchio by Carlo Collodi, as well as its myriad of adaptations, counterparts, and reinterpretations, which will be discussed throughout this essay, has been defined by the titular character's pursuit to become a "real boy." However, "boyhood," as I will be calling the term throughout my writing, is multifaceted; as seen in the swath of Pinocchio media, boyhood becomes often conflated with — among other such concepts — morality, and realness. While those elements may contribute to defining it, boyhood, as seen in The Adventures of Pinocchio, along with Pinocchio (1940), A.I. Artificial Intelligence, and Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio, comes from identity and independence.

Background

To understand the Pinocchio character on a fundamental level, it must be noted that "the popular image in the United States of what Pinocchio is all about bears little to no relation to Collodi's original" (Wunderlich). The cultural image of Pinocchio has been heavily influenced by its most popular iteration: the 1940 Walt Disney animated adaptation. As such, that film will also be given consideration alongside its progenitor, the original novel The Adventures of Pinocchio by Carlo Collodi.

In addition, two other works will be used to siphon the meaning of boyhood in Pinocchio media: A.I Artificial Intelligence and Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio. A.I. tells the story of David, a robot boy adopted and then rejected by his human family, who sets out to find the Blue Fairy so she can make him a real boy to earn his mother's love. Certainly, one could easily argue against A.I. as a Pinocchio film, thus counteracting what it offers to the Pinocchian scholarly discussion; the film adapts a wholly different story as its source material, Brian Aldiss' "Supertoys Last All Summer Long" and makes reference to Pinocchio but not in a way that defines the story as a Pinocchio story. David is, without a doubt, a product of the short story that is influenced by the supplementary Pinocchian elements that exist within A.I. However, Ian

Watson reports otherwise. Watson, a writer hired on to the project when it was still intended as a Stanley Kubrick production, was handed a copy of Collodi's novel by Kubrick as inspiration, stating that the film was to be "a picaresque robot version of Pinocchio;" and, furthermore one consultant, Sara Maitland, reported that Kubrick only referred to the project with her as "Pinocchio" (Watson). Based on this information, though the initial story sprouted from "Supertoys," the film, as professed by its original creator, is a Pinocchio story.

As for Guillermo del Toro's take on the story, when compared to the Kubrick-turned-Spielberg production, it is most glaringly a Pinocchio tale. As the film was only released in late 2021, del Toro's work has not had the opportunity to be thoroughly examined and brought into the scholarly debate; however, del Toro's iteration, unlike even the most popular Pinocchio adaptations, is one of the most faithful to Collodi's original intent, vision, and purpose. Many of the thematic elements will be addressed later, but as a brief overview, del Toro presents the same key themes as Collodi with purposeful nuance to convey exactly what Collodi intended. Furthermore, the changes del Toro makes in this incarnation do not detract from the story but rather amplify its already present themes, such as turning the Fox into the character of Count Volpe to explore the concept of obedience to authority (del Toro). For the sake of brevity, I will simply say that del Toro's Pinocchio draws influence from over one hundred years of Pinocchio, yet its inspiration from Collodi is most evident.

While I will not make such a bold claim that every Pinocchio adaptation should be given scholarly consideration, it should be noted that particular adaptations that stand the test of time do so for their popularity or contribution to the Pinocchian literary discussion. As Richard Wunderlich says in "The Tribulation of Pinocchio: How Social Change Can Wreck a Good Story," "The change in Pinocchio cannot be attributed solely to the impact of 'great writers' who created superior versions, for without some grounds on which to be receptive to those versions, society would probably have rejected them" (213). While great writing certainly contributes to a collective acceptance of particular adaptations — such as Walt Disney's Pinocchio, A.I. Artificial Intelligence, and Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio, which all come from renowned writers — there must be a basis on which to accept these adaptations into the canon. For Walt Disney, this ground was the socialization present in 1930s and 40s America; Jean-Marie Apostolidès states how, "Even if the original context of the work has disappeared in Disney's production, the story as it is presented there has been rewritten in terms of the American values of the early forties" (81). Much like how Collodi uses his novel as an educational bildungsroman to educate 19th-century Italian children on moral behavior (Mazzioni), so too does Disney in his iteration.

Morality: Society's Suggestions

A superficial reading of any Pinocchio work will likely lead to the conclusion that morality makes Pinocchio a real boy. In the original serialized novel, Pinocchio's streak of good behavior leads the Blue Fairy to promise that he "will cease to be a wooden puppet and become a

good little boy" (Collodi 112), and the arguably more famous phrasing in Disney's iteration, where bravery, honesty, and selflessness will lead him to "be a real boy."

Naarah Sawers describes in "Building the Perfect Product: The Commodification of Childhood in Contemporary Fairy Tale Film" what that notion of becoming a "good little boy" really implies, suggesting that the "good" falls in line with "the responsibilities of a peasant boy in the nineteenth century and is thus demonstrated by hard work (necessary for capitalist economies)." Elaborating further, she references the work of fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes when she says that the "pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps-fairytale," to borrow Zipes' phrasing, encapsulates the progression of children into functioning industrial society (Sawers, 44). Morality, as presented in various Pinocchio works, directly depends on the cultural values of the times they were written, not merely the ideological tenets of Collodi's novelization. Disney, for instance, "was concerned with the socialization of American childhood in the 1930s and '40s, a time when America was suffering an economic depression but was also looking toward a future of expansive economic growth during and following World War II" (Sawers 45). Children and their role in 1940s America is not the same as children in 1880s Italy, and as such, the moral undertones of each iteration must be tailored to the moral necessities of the respective countries at their respective times.

Regardless of the unique flavor of morality bestowed by a given author, it can't be denied how quintessential morality plays into the Pinocchio narrative — and specifically in his journey to boyhood. In the paramount article "Pinocchio and Pinocchiology" by Jennifer Stone, Pinocchio's prohibition from achieving boyhood comes from his "naughty body," distinguishing it from a "good voice," indicative of Italian (and early twentieth-century American) morality (338). A development in the Pinocchio canon that has endured has been the evolution of the Cricket character. Though present in Collodi's tale, the cricket gets killed by Pinocchio in the same chapter he is introduced; Walt Disney's film adaptation changes the role of this cricket, now named Jiminy Cricket, to be Pinocchio's conscious, a source of guidance to reign in his naïve impulsivity. Apostolidès describes Jiminy Cricket as "the puppet's superego," a Freudian term referring to one's self-critical consciousness. Personally, while I agree with the general notion, I prefer to think of it as Jiminy Cricket as the ego and Pinocchio as the id;, Jiminy as the logical side, and Pinocchio as the primal, emotional side. Future adaptations have drawn upon Disney's inclusion of Jiminy Cricket, separating the puppet and his companion into two characters that represent one whole boy; A.I. has David and Teddy, while del Toro's adaptation takes a more traditional approach with Pinocchio and Sebastian J. Cricket. Though for a much different reason, Stone refers to Freudian concepts in "Pinocchio and Pinocchiology," establishing a precedent for the incorporation of his ideas into the deconstruction of Pinocchio (331-3). The psychological will not be touched on any further, but it must be established how fundamental morality is to the Pinocchio story, and the schism between logical moral behavior and selfish desire can be represented through a psychological breakdown.

So, with Pinocchio as a story of gained morality, one could view that moral growth as the basis for boyhood, a sort of coming-of-age in which by learning values of right and wrong — regardless of the time it was written — one can achieve boyhood.

However, some objections are easily raised. Christina Mazzioni, in "The Short-Legged Fairy: Reading and Teaching Pinocchio as a Feminist," posits the question, "Is Pinocchio's mischief uniquely boyish?" (44). Though she comments on his mischief, this defining question tests all claims as to what defines boyhood. In regard to morality, concepts of good and evil exist outside of gender; morally correct behavior is not exclusive to boys. For textual evidence, consider the antagonists of the Fox and the Cat from Collodi's original tale, who have also been adapted for subsequent incarnations; the two characters, both presented as male, swindle and exploit Pinocchio for his money (35-9). Though using male pronouns in nearly every English incarnation or translation, Mazzioni presents a facet of the original Italian language that brings that male association into question: "many animals that crowd Collodi's book are all necessarily male or female. Thus, the Fox, 'la Volpe,' is feminine, and the cat, 'il Gatto,' is male" (85). While Mazzioni uses an example of immorality here, it establishes that good and evil, right and wrong, and morality and immorality are not exclusively gendered concepts.

Though Collodi undoubtedly crafts a story of morality, morality does not make Pinocchio a boy. This level of morality for Pinocchio better correlates with his childishness. As Wunderlich explains, "[Pinocchio as] the child is portrayed realistically, although comically. He is egoistic (but not selfish), preoccupied with immediate gratification, and insensitive to (indeed, unconscious of) his impact on others" (198-9). Returning once more to Mazzioni's question, do these characteristics invoke the behavior of boys or the behavior of children as a larger population?

Physical Transformation: Let's Get Real About This

To further disprove morality as a defining characteristic of boyhood, many iterations of the story do not reward Pinocchio with a physical transformation into a "real boy," nor does a moral change directly correlate with earning that title.

In The Adventures of Pinocchio, Pinocchio correctly behaves and makes conscientious decisions, but that does not instantaneously make him into a boy; in fact, he achieves the good-hearted moral behavior worthy of boyhood in the story once long before he properly achieves it. By Chapter 29, "[Pinocchio's] conduct in general was judged to be so praiseworthy and satisfactory that the [Blue] Fairy, as happy as could be, told him: 'Tomorrow your wish will finally come true… you will cease to be a wooden puppet and become a good little boy" (Collodi 112). His moral growth makes him worthy, in the eyes of the Blue Fairy, of a physical transformation, and yet, she withholds granting him this new form. Could it be, through supernatural foresight, that the Blue Fairy knows he will backslide into his morally dubious behavior that she withholds the gift of "real boyhood?"

While that could easily be argued, physical transformation into a real boy is never gifted to Pinocchio in many adaptations. Film critic John C. Tibbetts in "Robots Redux: 'A.I. Artificial

Intelligence' (2001)" actively suggests that this discovery of David's realness has no correlation with his boyness. David "never develops in any moral sense at all…" and "at no time… is it even suggested that he has achieved any of those virtues that Collodi's Pinocchio has learned it takes to be a 'real boy'" (Tibbetts 258-9). Comparing David and Pinocchio even further, Naarah Sawers explains in "Building the Perfect Product: The Commodification of Childhood in Contemporary Fairy Tale Film" that Pinocchio's growth and development define his boyhood. She declares in reference to A.I. and other films, "the protagonists in the films… are not rewarded with a biological human form" (Sawers 43). In addition to A.I., Stone brings into the discussion "Quintavalle's recent revision or restoration in which he memorialized Pinocchio in permanent puppethood, never to become a boy" (332). The language used by Stone suggests that it is, in fact, the transformation into a real boy that makes Pinocchio a boy, but this is refuted by yet another adaptation of Pinocchio, Guillermo del Toro's. In the climax of the film, after Pinocchio dies yet again, he chooses to become a real boy and escape the afterlife in order to save Geppetto from drowning, which he does, but at the cost of his own life. Pleading with the Blue Fairy, Geppetto holds up the still-wooden puppet and begs for him to come back, to which the Blue Fairy says, "To save you, he became a real boy, and real boys don't come back" (del Toro). Even after coming back to life as a "real boy" once more, Pinocchio maintains his wooden body, showing no signs of aging, only the wear, tear, and erosion of the wood, and his ultimate fate is left to speculation. Through these three examples, it becomes clear that Pinocchio does not become a "real boy" by transforming into a human.

However, those were all adaptations, reimaginings, and changes to the original story that may not reflect Collodi's intent when crafting The Adventures of Pinocchio. Well, if there is any doubt that Pinocchio's transformation into a human boy does not correlate with his transformation into a real boy, even in Collodi's original tale, Pinocchio's actual transformation into a boy was not supposed to occur, and when it does it gets withheld from him, even after undergoing all other character development. First, consider the notion that Collodi intended to kill Pinocchio; violent and seemingly out of context, this original ending would have seen the puppet hung from a tree after his encounter with the Fox and the Cat (50, 174). As the novel was originally serialized, this was the ending until editors and publishers encouraged Collodi to continue the story, and this original ending has been corroborated by many scholarly sources, so as to have been noted in the footnotes of the 2021 print of The Adventures of Pinocchio. Second, Pinocchio, by the end of the novel, matures enough to be gullibly deceived by the Fox and the Cat, takes responsibility for his past actions, willingly participates in manual work, and ultimately makes the decision to spend his finances responsibly and for a kindhearted cause (Collodi 152-7). If the Blue Fairy was concerned about his future actions — which she is, as seen when she tells him to use good judgment in the future (158) — then she should have been able to bestow his boyhood at the beginning of the chapter, if not sooner.

Though both facets of this realness could be easily disputed, Pinocchio's classic wish, expressed throughout countless iterations, is to "become a real boy," borrowing the phrasing from Walter Samuel Cramp's English translation of the original text, which was also used in

Walt Disney's animated adaptation. Based on this ubiquitous expression, a question arises: Is Pinocchio not real, or is his boyness not real? Is he already a boy and wants to become a human, or has he yet to achieve real boyhood?

So, What Makes Pinocchio a Real Boy?

If these iconic characteristics of Pinocchio do not make Pinocchio a real boy, what does? Two key characteristics present in most, if not all, Pinocchio adaptations: his identity and his independence.

Looking first at his identity, Pinocchio's growth, though largely viewed from a moral lens, reflects a personality shift, as well. As was already stated, by the end of Collodi's novel, Pinocchio has gone from an irritating, rebellious brat who teased and hurt others (1-9) to a responsible boy who listens to his father, cares for others, and is sharp enough to not fall for deception (152-7). Though the promise of boyhood has been the primary motivator for his moral change, a change in behavior arose from it.

This can be seen in A.I. as well. Though it is already established that David does not have any character arc, he becomes an individual through his experience. At the climax of the film, David is confronted with another David model. This David model, adorned in white clothes with neat and tidy hair, kindly stares at David, the protagonist, covered in dirt, messy hair, and dark clothes. David is no longer just another Mecha (to use the film's terms); he is David, an individual, and he lashes out, screaming, "I'm David! I'm David! I'm David… I'm special! I'm unique" (Spielberg). Though painted heartbreakingly as the boy confronts his identity as a mass-produced robot, David is correct. What separates David from other Mecha like him, beyond his experience traveling with Gigolo Joe to find the Blue Fairy, is his capability to think and behave beyond his programming; David's desire for his adoptive mother's love leads to him desiring, dreaming, and developing the capability to love (Spielberg).

Lastly, as for del Toro's iteration, identity is crucial to Pinocchio's development into a real boy. A large internal conflict for this incarnation of Pinocchio is the precedent and wound left by Geppetto's first son, Carlo, who had died and whose loss spurred Geppetto to make the puppet in the first place. Throughout the film, Geppetto makes comments like, "Carlo never acted like this," "You promised you would behave… like [Carlo]," and "I made you to be like Carlo." Yet, in an example of emotional maturity and growth from both Geppetto and Pinocchio, he reconciles his feelings and tells his son, "Don't be like Carlo, or anyone else… Be exactly who you are," to which the boy replies, "Then I will be Pinocchio" (del Toro).

As for independence, consider the puppet for what he is: a puppet. Fundamentally, the symbolism of the main character as once a puppet but no more reflects a rejection of authority and control. Stone describes it in terms of a "naughty body" and a "good voice," where the body "is deaf to the sounds of the father" (338); this disrespect toward Geppetto is echoed in Apostolidès note that "[h]e resists being worked and polished, and he is repeatedly insolent toward his creator" (76). Collodi's Pinocchio

In Disney's iteration, while his disobedience stems from naïvity rather than willful ignorance, Pinocchio still resists the control of an authority figure, as presented through the song "I've Got No Strings," where he prances about and preaches about the joys of lack of restraint. Ironically enough, this song is taught to him by and also sung by Stromboli, the exploitative puppetmaster who seeks to control Pinocchio by locking him up and forcing him to perform at his shows (Disney). The condemnation of this behavior by Jiminy Cricket and the echoing of the same sentiment from an explicitly immoral character clearly paints this whole rejection of authority as bad — though Pinocchio ironically flees from his controller just a moment later.

However, no work of Pinocchian literature best exemplifies the importance of autonomy and the discernment of authority in budding boyhood than Guillermo del Toro's. In the film, there are three key authority figures: Geppetto, Volpe (a sort of combination of the Fox and the puppeteer, who is represented as Stromboli in Disney's version), and the Podestà, a fascist government official responsible for managing youth military training, as this iteration is set during World War II. To briefly encapsulate these three storylines, Pinocchio actively rebels against the two that seek to abuse him — Volpe and the Podestà — but makes the conscious decision to obey, serve, and support Geppetto (del Toro). Though he writes regarding the original novel, Wunderlich best captures why this distinction between these three authority figures is so important: "[Pinocchio] must learn to distinguish between right and wrong" (213). In Collodi's novel, Pinocchio spends most of the novel confronting, rejecting, or attempting to reject, authority figures like the Carabinieri, a justice system, represented through a gorilla and dogs, and, unfortunately, Geppetto, whom Pinocchio rebels from less and less as he comes into his own.

Pinocchio is not a story about doing the "right thing" by submitting to authority; it is a story about learning right and wrong so as to rebel against the wrong authority and to mutually accept the right authority. This, in conjunction with Pinocchio's growing identity, is what makes him a boy; he's got no strings to hold him down, but he knows who to listen to for guidance.

Conclusion

Candidly, there were many avenues of literary exploration that could not be surveyed within this essay: childhood, examining Pinocchio as merely a child figure and distinguishing childhood from boyhood, and femininity, contrasting the character of the Blue Fairy as the predominant female representative with Pinocchio to learn more about how Pinocchio represents boyhood and defines boyhood. Furthermore, with greater time to explore these thematic concepts, a much more thorough analysis can be performed. These fields — as well as the adaptations drawn from for the purposes of this research, as well as others not mentioned — should be considered for further academic research moving forward.

Yet, based on the thematic ideas examined — refuting morality, physical transformation, and "realness" as the boyish characters of Pinocchio — the puppet's identity and ability to discern healthy authority remain as the defining characteristics of growth along his journey to real "boyness." Based on this process of elimination, while morality and reality are influences in

Pinocchio's behavior that lend to his boyhood, they are just characteristics of the grander ideas of identity and autonomy. Though he may be a pain, a nuisance, a scoundrel, and a rebel, that is what makes Pinocchio, well, Pinocchio, and that is what makes him a real boy.

Through Carlo Collodi's comical and satirical work, this understanding of gender can be respectfully spread and used to open conversations. Though Jack Zipes writes the following sentence regarding fantasy, its core principles rest in the heart of the little wooden boy: "Fantasy matters because it can enable us to resist such criminality, and it can do so with irony, joy, sophistication, seriousness, and cunning" (90).

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