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Tangling with Dragons: Growing Up Fairy Tale Style in Tangled and How to Train Your Dragon

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Tangling with Dragons:
Growing up in the Animated Fairy Tales
*Tangled* and *How to Train Your Dragon*

by Randy Rasmussen
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Introduction: Magic Hair and Fire-Breathing Dragons

Each fairy tale is a magic mirror which reflects some aspects of our inner world, and of the steps required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity.

--Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment (309)

In his fascinating book, The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales, Bruno Bettelheim asserts that fairy tales are about “rebirth to a higher plane. Children (and adults, too) must be able to believe that reaching a higher form of existence is possible if they master the developmental steps this requires” (Bettelheim, 179). Max Luthi, in Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales, adds an obstacle to be overcome before that journey can begin. “Only with great difficulty does one take leave of his old, familiar form of existence; he tends to cling desperately to what he has” (Luthi, 113). And in The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell refers to “keys that open the whole realm of the desired and feared adventure of the discovery of the self,” resulting in a necessary “destruction of the world…and ourselves within it,” followed by “a wondrous reconstruction, of the bolder, cleaner, more spacious and fully human life” (Campbell, 5).
Rapunzel, heroine of the 2010 animated fairy tale *Tangled*, must venture forth from her safe yet confining tower in order to find her greater self in a larger, more dangerous but potentially more rewarding world. Her reluctant companion, Flynn Rider, must endure his coerced adventure with Rapunzel to be re-born as the more open and generous Eugene Fitzherbert. In *How to Train Your Dragon*, an undersized and underappreciated Viking teenager named Hiccup has to confront a terrifying dragon deep in the forest outside his home before he can stop living in the shadow of his already legendary father, the village chief. “Victory is not over others but only over oneself and over villainy (mainly one’s own, which is projected as the hero’s antagonist)” (Bettelheim, 127-128). Campbell echoes this view. “The passage of the mythologized hero may be overground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward” (Campbell, 22). The various monsters, human and otherwise, that Rapunzel, Eugene and Hiccup battle are all reflections of the worst that lies within themselves.

If the lesson of fairy tales is that there is hope for slaying the fire-breathing dragons, big bad wolves, wicked witches and evil giants in your life, and in the process gaining control over yourself and fulfilling the best that is within you, movies are full of characters who fail to do so. Growing up is not exclusively the job of children. Many adults never progress beyond, or for any number of reasons regress back into, childish states of fear, anger, compulsion and selfishness. As portrayed in live-action movies from a wide variety of genres, these grown-ups would seem, at first glance, to have little in common with their younger, animated counterparts. The terms of their struggle may differ from genre to genre, but the struggle itself is not so different. Consider a few examples.

Horror films are the shadowy cousins of fairy tales. Larry Talbot, in *The Wolf Man* of 1941, is
a young man tragically consumed by violent compulsions arising partly from childhood insecurities and resentments lurking beneath his congenial facade and partly from powerful external forces that dominate him, all of which congeal into the supernatural, metaphorical curse of lycanthropy. The female leads in both *Cat People* (1942) and *Son of Dracula* (1943) likewise fall prey to obsessions that prevent them from achieving normal, healthy relationships with their would-be lovers. Like Talbot, they end up dead. *The Shining* (1980) features a middle-aged protagonist, Jack Torrance, who at first seems to have conquered his past demons, until he loses himself in a morass of frustration, resentment, alcoholism and fixation on a fantasized re-creation of a glamorous, bigoted, privileged past. By contrast, Jack’s young son, Danny, liberates himself from dependence on his own crippling fantasy, his emotionally stunted alter ego (Tony), just in time to outwit and destroy the evil giant his homicidal father becomes.

Film noir movies are adult fairy tales, of a sort. Decades of grief over his wife’s murder, compounded by bitterness over the injustice of her killer going unpunished, plagues Sheriff Hank Quinlan in *Touch of Evil* (1958). He’s a brilliant detective who squanders his talents by framing criminal suspects and deceiving his best friend in order to administer his corrupt brand of justice. In essence, he becomes what he hates, punishing himself with booze and candy bars until he’s a wreck of his former self. In *Body Heat* (1981), femme fatale Matty Walker, for reasons buried deep in her past and never revealed to the audience, is compelled to ruthlessly manipulate everyone around her. Incapable of emotional attachments, she plots her husband’s murder with her gullible lover, Ned, then frames him for it and retires to an island paradise to lead a life of cold, solitary self-indulgence.

Satire and black comedy too have their share of adults who backslide into infantile behavior.
In the 1964 Cold War comedy *Dr. Strangelove*, rational and peace-loving President Merkin Muffley masterfully negotiates through a minefield of monstrously destructive weapons and unstable personalities, ranging from immature to psychotic, in order to save the world from nuclear doomsday. But in the end he succumbs to his own fear of responsibility and yields control to his lunatic double, the power-hungry, death-obsessed title character.

In the realm of science fiction, the television series *Star Trek* features a compelling story about an adolescent who tries but fails to achieve maturity. Charlie X survives a traumatic childhood isolated from other people, including his parents. He is given special powers by well-intentioned aliens who rescue him physically but lack the understanding to help him mature emotionally. Suddenly thrust back into human society, Charlie desperately strives to fit in. But despite mentoring by several responsible adults, he falls prey to frustration and impatience, employing his special powers to satisfy his all-consuming, adolescent desires by violent means. Eventually he is returned to the stern, prison-like custody of his alien “parents,” never to enjoy the fruits of human friendship and love.

Films of no particular genre contain less violent but no less interesting characters struggling to lead more “fully human” lives. *Citizen Kane*’s protagonist never overcomes the emotional wounds of separation from his parents at an early age. As a young, middle-aged and then old man, Charles Foster Kane compulsively spends his inherited fortune to surround himself with the cold comfort of material objects, fails at two marriages and betrays his closest friend by treating him and everyone else as nothing more than a means to a dimly understood end. Eventually he becomes a bitter recluse who retreats to an idealized fantasy of his lost childhood. We’ll encounter his like in *Tangled*, in the guise of the charmingly irresponsible rogue, Flynn Rider.
In *The Chalk Garden*, a 1964 domestic drama, a troubled teenage girl and her possessive grandmother emerge from their destructive and self-destructive ruts thanks to the intervention of a middle-aged governess who previously survived a similar struggle of her own, and changed her name after doing so. An admirer refers to that discarded name as a relic from “before you were born,” echoing the notion of re-birth described by Bettelheim, Luthi and Campbell. The aesthetic trappings of these various stories differ widely from film to film and genre to genre. Yet they are all about the difficult process of growing up and the hazards of failing to do so.

Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* is primarily concerned with heroes of mythology. But his description of the stages of a hero’s journey from immaturity to maturity, or from unconsciousness to super consciousness as he phrases it, is equally applicable to the fairy tales featuring Rapunzel, Flynn Rider and Hiccup. According to Campbell, the hero is “lured, carried away or voluntarily proceeds” from his familiar home to the “threshold of adventure” (Campbell, 210-211). Defying the instructions of her alleged mother, Rapunzel voluntarily leaves the sheltering confines of her tower to explore the alluring yet frightening world outside. Flynn Rider, an intruder in Rapunzel’s tower, is blackmailed, in effect “carried away,” and forced to escort her. Hiccup, like Rapunzel, ignores his parent’s orders and sneaks out of his home to pursue a deadly dragon into the forest. He too is a voluntary adventurer.

At the threshold of adventure the hero encounters a herald who is “often dark, loathly, or judged evil by the world” yet is potentially a guide to hidden treasures (Campbell, 44). For Rapunzel that herald is Flynn Rider, wanted thief and dreaded stranger, whom she subdues and then coerces into becoming her guide to the treasure of the floating lights. For Flynn that herald is Rapunzel, who in his eyes embodies the terrifying prospect of the trust and love that he’s
scrupulously avoided since childhood. Hiccup’s herald is the most feared of all dragons, whom
the boy defeats, then sets free, then with great effort persuades to become his friend. By like
token, Hiccup becomes the dragon’s herald to a better existence.

“Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely
intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests) while others give magical aid
(helpers),” until he “undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward” (Campbell, 211).

Rapunzel’s courage and judgment are frequently tested, often by characters she eventually
transforms into allies. Overcoming irrational fear and acute disappointment, she faces her
ultimate test back at the tower where her journey began, at the hands of the “mother” who tried
to stop her from leaving in the first place. Flynn Rider’s climactic test occurs at the same time
and in the same location.

Hiccup faces equally difficult challenges along his road to maturity, and like Rapunzel’s they
are often posed by characters who later become his loyal friends. His final test in the first
*Dragon* movie is his confrontation with the gigantic Red Death dragon, who embodies the very
worst to be found in everyone, including Hiccup himself. Defeating that foe, Hiccup is rewarded
with more than he knew he wanted at the start of his quest.

The unfamiliar regions through which Rapunzel and Hiccup must navigate are very much in
line with those summarized by Campbell. For Rapunzel and Flynn, they include a forest, a
nightmarish inn full of thugs and ruffians, and a dark, dangerous tunnel in which they almost
drown. For Hiccup they include a forest, an enchanted cove within that forest, the once
unreachable sky and a volcanic island dominated by the biggest, scariest dragon of them all.

*Dragon 2* adds to that list a seductive tropical paradise that becomes the site of Hiccup’s biggest
miscalculation and worst defeat. Within these fairy tale realms of “strangely fluid and polymorphous beings” our heroes perform “superhuman deeds,” endure “unimaginable torments” and experience “impossible delights” (Campbell, 44).

During the course of their journeys into the unknown, the hero and heroine attain expanded consciousness and discover their “gentle heart” (Campbell, 99). Rapunzel finds a world of new possibilities beyond her cloistered tower, learns how to maneuver in that complex world, proves willing to sacrifice her private interests for the good of others and eventually earns the royal crown, a symbol of wisdom and independence, that was prematurely placed on her head when she was a baby. Eugene Fitzherbert, formerly the arrogant Flynn Rider who cared about no one else fancied himself master of the world, discovers his larger, better self through the eyes of a young woman who possesses much less experience but far more wisdom than does he when their journey together begins.

Hiccup’s heroic triumph in How to Train Your Dragon is another act of self-discovery through interaction with the world beyond his home. He displays courage in the face of a very rational fear. More importantly, he shows mercy to and befriends a traditional arch-enemy. He conquers his fear of being judged a failure, and the compulsive behavior to which that fear drove him. He rescues the people who doubted him and, with the help of his new friend and former foe, gains the ability to explore new regions far beyond his original reach. In How to Train Your Dragon 2, Hiccup, now a young man, contends with and conquers deep insecurities about his ability to take his father’s place as village chief, engages in a battle for independence from his long-lost, newly-found mother, overcomes despair after his own error leads to the death of his father, and learns to forgive his best friend for a terrible but involuntary betrayal.
Finally, the hero must return home from his journey, “bringing with him the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece or his sleeping princess back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet or the ten thousand worlds” (Campbell, 167). Rapunzel brings to her parents’ kingdom a reinvigorated joy of community even before she or they realize she is their princess. And when she returns a second time as the acknowledged heir to that kingdom, she brings with her the reformed outcasts who become welcome, contributing members of the community. She even marries one of them. And there are indications that her rule will be more democratic than that of her royal parents, who until Rapunzel’s return are never shown outside their royal castle, hobnobbing with ordinary people. The golden, magical hair she sacrifices in order to achieve this extraordinary triumph seems a small price to pay for the wisdom she gains.

Hiccup returns to Berk, after losing a leg and nearly his life during his great adventure of discovery, as an acknowledged hero. The gifts he brings with him are peace, a revolutionary new understanding between Vikings and dragons, and a spirit of scientific innovation and exploration that promises even better things to come. And he accomplishes all this without growing an inch or packing one more ounce of muscle onto his puny frame. In Dragon 2, Hiccup acquires the added height and sinew, plus five more years of valuable life experience. He has mastered dragon flying to a spectacular degree, but is now plagued with the insecurities of young manhood. Is he willing to slough off the last vestiges of adolescence and take his father’s place as Chief of Berk? Only after suffering crushing defeat and grievous personal loss, and refusing to submit to the despair and cynicism that threaten to engulf him, is he ready to assume his new responsibilities as an adult. Like Rapunzel, he must displace his parents and take control of his
own life. The village over which he now rules, which is essentially himself, benefits from a newly acquired wisdom that in some respects transcends that of his parents.

The heroes of all three films realize during the course of their travels that the familiar world they left, and to which they return, and the unfamiliar world through which they journeyed, are one and the same. It is the hero’s task to “knit together” those two worlds, because he or she, not the metaphorical monsters encountered in the world beyond the threshold, is the “alien presence” with whom we must all inevitably contend (Campbell, 196 and 337). Mother Gothel and the Stabbington Brothers are reflections of Rapunzel and Flynn, just as the Red Death, Drago and his Alpha Male slave are reflections of Hiccup. This fairy tale truth runs counter to our tendency to imagine that “all the flies in the ointment, all the hairs in the soup, are the faults of some unpleasant someone else” (Campbell, 101).

The hero’s “sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world” (Campbell, 211) sounds a bit outside the realm of animated fairy tales like Tangled and the Dragon films. But the projected unions between Rapunzel and Eugene and between Hiccup and Astrid serve well enough, especially since both couples start out as indifferent strangers at best and outright enemies at worst. All four characters have to overcome misunderstanding, selfishness and hostility before they are capable of loving or worthy of being loved.

How to Train Your Dragon 2 and a television series based on the first movie illustrate another point Joseph Campbell makes about the hero’s journey. “The boon brought from the transcendent deep becomes quickly rationalized into nonentity, and the need becomes great for another hero to refresh the word” (Campbell, 188). True enough, the beneficial changes Hiccup brings to the merged worlds of Vikings and dragons at the end of How to train Your Dragon
yield to forgetfulness, complacency and the inevitable complications of day-to-day living.

Why single out *Tangled* and the *Dragon* films from the galaxy of animated fairy tales released in the past few decades? Simply put, because I find them so compelling. They’re beautifully made, brilliantly constructed, full of adventure, pathos, humor and the sheer excitement of storytelling. They’re the films that speak most vividly to me in the genre of fairy tales. Marie-Louise von Franz, in *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, insists that all the objective analysis in the world “means absolutely nothing if you leave out the feeling experience of the individual” (von Franz, 10). A relatively new fan of animated fairy tales, I find the hyper-realistic details of these movies fascinating: from the particles of dust floating in the sunlit air that render the interior of Rapunzel’s tower more tangible, to Hiccup’s freckled hands and face that speak of the harsh environment in which he was raised. Not much occurs by chance in an animated feature, so it’s fun to speculate on why the filmmakers put it there.

Music is often the key that draws me into particular films, and these three are no exception. The metronomic cadence of “Forbidden Friendship,” in *How to train Your Dragon*, propels us step by cautious step through Hiccup’s difficult progression with Toothless from suspicious stranger to trusted friend, until that tentative music become a triumphant dance. In *Tangled*, the extraordinary mixture of raw teenage energy and quiet desperation in “When Will My Life Begin?” conveys Rapunzel’s struggle to make her life of solitary routine and confinement an exciting adventure.

*Tangled* and *How to Train Your Dragon* were both released in 2010. One is the story of a girl becoming a woman, the other of a boy becoming a man. The two films were made at different
studios, by different creative teams. Their stories are set in very different locations and times.

Yet the heroic journeys of Rapunzel and Hiccup contain so many fundamental similarities that their superficial differences serve to highlight the former. Hiccup accomplishes during the course of two movies what Rapunzel does in one. Both eventually take the reins of authority from their parents, though in different ways. Rapunzel’s mother and father conveniently, literally step out of the picture (the film frame) as she takes charge of their former kingdom, in a future projected by Eugene’s off-screen narration. Hiccup’s father dies a tragic death, indirectly caused by his son’s error in judgment. Hiccup’s ascent to the position of Chief of Berk is as much a burden as it is a triumph. Tracing the numerous, underlying parallels between the two storylines is rewarding to the understanding of each: perhaps more so than if the stories were more alike on the surface.

Fairy tales are famous for their typical happy endings, preserving the notion of hope for the future after a period of crisis. The three films discussed here are remarkably sophisticated dramatizations of the human struggle for maturity, confidence and independence. Wish-fulfillment operates side-by-side with cautionary content. The hero’s triumph is never far from the possibility, and in Dragon 2 the reality, of tragedy. Rebellion and reconciliation, self-indulgence and self-restraint, contend with each other at nearly equal strength. All three movies run the gamut from tragedy to comedy, horror to romance, frenetic action to quiet intimacy. Not bad for “cartoons.”
Un-Tangled:
Out of the Tower, Into the Frying Pan

Bruno Bettelheim described the atypical reaction of one young boy to the Brothers Grimm story of “Rapunzel.” The boy’s father, mother and grandmother were frequently absent from home. Feeling abandoned, he took comfort from the security supplied to Rapunzel by the enchantress who kept her locked in a tower. Later in life the same boy derived equal though contrary satisfaction from Rapunzel using her long hair to let her beloved prince climb the tower and provide her with a measure of release from her imprisonment (Bettelheim, 17).

In the animated feature Tangled, Rapunzel exhibits the same contradiction as the boy who reacted to the Brothers Grimm version. Desiring more freedom as she grows into a teenager, she nevertheless fears leaving her secure yet constricting home for the unknown world outside. That fear is encouraged by the evil enchantress masquerading as her mother, who imprisons and exploits her for selfish reasons. But some of it originates within the girl herself, as a natural reluctance to leave behind the sheltered existence of childhood, and as an understandable reaction to crushing disappointment when she does.

Rapunzel experiences an emotional tug-of-war that nearly everyone, female and male, deals with in some form and at some time in their lives. That includes Rapunzel’s male companion on
her heroic journey into the unknown: Eugene Fitzherbert, alias Flynn Rider. The fictitious name he prefers, and the lifestyle that goes along with it, are a measure of the fantasy prison to which he desperately clings rather than face a reality he fears will disappoint him.

In his chapter on “Rapunzel,” Max Luthi observes that a child clings to what is familiar and safe, yet “is often fascinated by and feels a need to confront the symbols of evil in fairy tales.” Exploring the woods “hand in hand with her father, the child does not want to see the harmless bunny rabbit, but the wolf” (Luthi, p.114). For Rapunzel, it’s “thugs and ruffians” she fears yet needs to confront. For Hiccup, in How to Train Your Dragon, it’s the most dangerous dragon. The fairy tale formula, with its typical though by no means guaranteed happy ending, often plays the protective parental role by supplying hope that the child can overcome his or her primal fears to become, in the end, a Princess or a Chief—the master of her or his own existence. That is fortunate, because parents within fairy tales are not always reliable, which is one of the lessons a child must learn before attaining independence.

As a fairy tale, Tangled is full of adventure, magical happenings and unlikely escapes. Yet those fictional devices are inextricably tied to a realistic and powerful dramatization of human perception and feeling in all their dizzying variety. The fanciful evokes the everyday. The external evokes the internal. The fairy tale approach to storytelling allows heroine and hero to eventually triumph over obstacles to their maturity. At times they seem to do so miraculously, but with a sharp awareness that at any given moment their “happily ever after” could be snuffed out by circumstances beyond their control or by flaws within themselves. We, the audience, get the positive outcome we want, while recognizing that our wishes are being magically indulged by the story-tellers.
Tangled makes an effort to distinguish itself from previous versions of the “Rapunzel” tale by keeping us guessing about what’s going to happen next. False fronts and misleading expectations are scattered throughout the movie. Flynn Rider begins that misdirection with his off-screen narration in the film’s Prolog. He tells us, in hushed, sober tones, that the tale to follow concerns his own death. Then his voice brightens with a revised summary. It’s really a “fun” story about a girl named Rapunzel. Meanwhile, the camera closes in on a poster nailed to a tree in a forest. The poster reads “Wanted Dead or Alive,” features a portrait of the narrator, “Flynn Rider—Thief,” and is stamped with the royal seal of a golden sunflower. Eventually we discover that Flynn Rider is a phony name. The narrator is really Eugene Fitzherbert, but prefers to deal with the world as the dashing con-man known as Flynn Rider. And the royal seal that authorizes Flynn’s execution will in time symbolize Eugene’s liberation from himself and warm acceptance by the King and Queen, for whom that same symbol refers to something far more important than hunting down and punishing criminals. In short, the “Wanted” poster implies much that will be overturned by the rest of the story.

The poster depicts Flynn Rider as a charming but not entirely trustworthy rogue—a variation on Han Solo from the Star Wars movies. He will eventually outgrow that impression, proving it inaccurate. But one of the few things about the poster that proves enduringly accurate is the drawing of Flynn’s nose. Subsequent versions of the “Wanted” poster contain different depictions of that nose, much to Flynn’s dismay. It’s a running gag targeting Flynn’s vanity, which will be severely challenged during the course of the movie.

“Once upon a time,” the qualifier that stamps many fairy tales as timeless, a drop of golden sunlight fell to Earth and spawned a golden, glowing, magical flower with the power to heal
injury and cure sickness. That’s a fanciful metaphor for youth itself: a seemingly magical
time of boundless vitality and potential. Many adults have searched in vain for the elusive
Fountain of Youth, in a variety of delusionary guises. In fairy tales, fortunately, such things need
not be taken literally.

The drop of sun falls to earth close to the edge of a mountain precipice overlooking the ocean:
a dark, dangerous-looking place suggestive of great peril. The two characters who initially
benefit from the magic flower that grows from that drop of sun are both close to death. Mother
Gothel is a wrinkled, stooped old woman who happens upon the sun-kissed flower and taps its
magic to restore her youth. “Bring back what once was mine,” she sings. It’s a common fantasy,
not inherently evil until she hoards that power from everyone else, including a Queen on the
verge of dying from complications during pregnancy.

Pregnancy and its potentially life-threatening complications, though not a major topic of this
fairy tale, are certainly relevant to a story about a girl growing up to become a woman. The
Queen’s dangerous pregnancy and old Mother Gothel’s fear of death are appropriate brackets
around the film’s heroine, Rapunzel, whose life we witness from birth to age eighteen. What the
Queen and Mother Gothel are dealing with before Rapunzel arrives on scene are physical and
emotional challenges Rapunzel might eventually have to contend with as an adult. How she will
deal with them depends on how she navigates that journey to adulthood.

Though nothing overtly suggests it, the Queen’s near-fatal pregnancy may reflect back on the
narrator’s story as well. Flynn Rider, we eventually learn, grew up an orphan. Did his mother die
in childbirth? Even if that’s mere speculation, the absence of his parents is for Flynn equivalent
to their grievous death. By introducing a magic, healing flower into the story he narrates, Flynn
might, if unconsciously, be rescuing the parents, especially the mother he lost much too early in life.

The power of the magic flower is morally neutral. It can and will be used for good and bad. It can inspire its possessor to be generous or selfish. It can be a boon or a curse, bringing out the best or worst in people. Light from the lanterns of the soldiers searching for the flower to save their Queen is golden, like the flower itself. Mother Gothel’s lantern, by contrast, glows green: the color of jealousy, or miserly habits. Symbolism is often arbitrary. The color green could just as well signal life or regeneration, as it will in Rapunzel’s eyes and the big, wide forest into which she ventures. With regard to Mother Gothel, it signals envy and greed.

The sunflower hanging above Rapunzel’s crib in her parent’s castle matches the royal stamp on Flynn Rider’s “Wanted” poster. Thus the same image yields two very different meanings: one celebrates life, the other threatens to extinguish it. A long time will pass before Rider associates that symbol with anything other than doom.

Also dangling above Rapunzel’s crib are effigies of a lizard, a baby duck, a winged Cupid and a horse, all intended to amuse and stimulate the infant gazing up at them. Like many childhood attachments, they take root in Rapunzel’s subconscious mind, later to play important roles in her life as a young woman of eighteen. The lizard becomes Pascal, pet chameleon, only friend and imaginary confidante during her years of imprisonment in Mother Gothel’s tower. The baby duck perhaps accounts for her impulsively favorable expectations about the Snuggly Duckling Inn, before she encounters the inn’s patrons. The winged Cupid becomes one of the characters she encounters in that scary establishment. The white horse comes to life as Maximus, a potential enemy she tames and befriends. As she grows from child to adolescent to adult, Rapunzel seeks
to recapture half-forgotten things associated with her happy infancy. She finds their reflections in characters she encounters later in life, like Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), peopling her fanciful dreams with characters who were familiar to her back on the Kansas farm where she was raised.

Also occurring very early in Rapunzel’s life is her first exposure to the floating lanterns. Tucked safely in her mother’s arms, she watches her parents launch a single, glowing lantern into the sky as a celebration of her birth. Years later, though she cannot remember why, the sight of floating lights, even at a great distance, draws her like a beacon in the dark. The lights are more than just intriguing, they are comforting and vaguely familiar to her.

Flynn narrates, “And for that one moment, everything was perfect. And then that moment ended.” It always does, despite our best efforts. The movie will end on another “perfect” moment, somehow without striking a false note. *Tangled* is a very self-conscious fairy tale whose creators seem to know they are dealing in fragile commodities. The great joy of the film’s “perfect” ending is its welcome overthrow of the heartbreaking tragedy that nearly precludes it. For the young heroines and heroes of fairy tales, it’s all about possibilities, not finalities.

“And then that moment ended” darkly prognosticates the inevitable unraveling of even the “happily ever after” that concludes the movie. Flynn Rider, narrator of the Prolog and the Epilog to come, has crafted a tale to his own liking, full of high adventure and difficult challenges, but in the end fulfilling his (and our) wishes for himself. Making his voice the frame around this fairy tale makes us, the audience, more aware of the potential reality outside that comfortable frame. In one elegantly succinct line he expresses the ephemeral nature of human existence.

The King and Queen place a royal crown on their baby’s head. It’s adorable, like dressing up a
child in adult clothing. But the giggling, rambunctious infant sets the crown askew. Rapunzel may have been born a princess, unlike her counterpart in the Brothers Grimm tale, but she has yet to earn that crown, which in our time and place is less symbolic of ruling over the lives of others than of taking charge of one’s own life.

Sneaking into the royal bedchamber late one night, illuminated by the moon rather than the sun, Mother Gothel casts an ominous shadow over the sleeping infant with the golden hair. She seeks to exploit the magic of Rapunzel’s hair to restore her own youth, again. Youth constantly passes from one generation to the next. Sometimes the older generation refuses to part with it, in one manner or another, regardless of the cost to their children. The power of one drop of sunlight passed from the golden flower, through the Queen, and into Rapunzel. Initially it appears Mother Gothel would have been satisfied to steal a single lock of the girl’s hair. But once that lock is severed from the rest, it and the root from which it came turns brown and loses its power. So in her desperation, rooted in the fear of aging and death, Mother Gothel kidnaps Rapunzel. In effect, she robs the child of her youth, including the happiness Rapunzel should have experienced growing up within the shelter of her loving parents’ protection, in order that Gothel might recapture her own youth.

“Bring back what once was mine. What once was mine,” Mother Gothel sings as she regains her youthful appearance and vitality. That’s a sentiment we all share, villain or not. The question is, what are we willing to do to others in order to get it? As she leaps off the royal balcony with Rapunzel in her arms, Gothel sweeps her black cape behind her, like Count Dracula or any other predatory monster who steals from others in order to feed his own needs.

A few years later, in a tower hidden from view within a deep canyon, Mother Gothel brushes
Rapunzel’s glowing hair as the young girl sings the song that triggers the magic to which her false mother is addicted. But this time “Bring back what once was mine” speaks less for Mother Gothel’s youth than for Rapunzel’s stolen childhood. Without yet realizing it, the kidnapped girl demands what is being denied to her: the right to grow up and be free to make her own choices. Rapunzel’s yearning expresses itself more directly as a child’s natural instinct to explore—to go outside and play. Mother Gothel suppresses that instinct, maintaining control over her daughter through fear of mysterious evils that lie in wait outside the tower where Rapunzel is imprisoned. The “horrible, selfish people” out there who would do terrible things to Rapunzel ironically describe Gothel herself, inside the tower. She projects her own warped personality onto the world at large in order to deflect her sense of guilt as well as to manipulate Rapunzel. How appropriate that we first entered Mother Gothel’s tower through a keyhole, with no key present, symbolizing the tower’s function as a prison for both of its residents. Rapunzel is the captive of a youth-obsessed adult. Mother Gothel is a prisoner of her own desperate need to remain young.

“Yes, Mommy” is the naïve, trusting acquiescence of a small child to what should be a parent’s protective instincts and superior wisdom. But as her youthful hair is brushed and exploited by her phony mother, Rapunzel gazes into the golden fire blazing in the nearby fireplace. That fire quickly fades, but Rapunzel’s rebellious curiosity stays lit and soon burns brighter.

In defiance of Mother Gothel, a slightly older Rapunzel sneaks out of bed, tiptoes past her sleeping mother and peers out through a tower window to gaze in wonder at hundreds of glowing lights in the distant night sky. The lights are the King and Queen’s annual attempt to signal their long lost child and guide her home, using floating lanterns like the one they launched to celebrate her birth. As symbols of Rapunzel’s childhood dream, they speak of both freedom
and a yearning for the idyllic home and parents she lost many years earlier. In a sense, those are contrary wishes: the desire for independence versus the desire to return to the pampered realm of infancy. The latter is a regressive utopian fantasy. No parent and no home can remain idyllic to a growing, maturing child. Mother Gothel is the oppressive parental figure from whom Rapunzel must either free herself or never become an adult. To put a happier spin on the matter, as tokens of home and family the floating lanterns perhaps represent a reconciliation with the parents against whom Rapunzel must rebel only until she completes her journey to maturity. Permanent estrangement from her parents would constitute an unresolved problem for her.

The tower in which Rapunzel is kept prisoner is very tall. You’d think it would at least provide a spectacular view of the surrounding landscape. Yet it is dwarfed and hemmed in by the higher cliffs of the canyon surrounding it. The sky, however, is still accessible to Rapunzel. And it is to that sky that her hopes return every year on her birthday.

What a contrast between Rapunzel the trusting, needy child and Rapunzel the feisty teenager we encounter in the next scene. Making do with what is available to her, she adopts a little chameleon she names Pascal as her surrogate playmate and best friend. The lizard is green, matching Rapunzel’s eyes. His human-like qualities of understanding and sympathy are a creation of her imagination and rooted in a dim, comforting recollection of the lizard figurine that hung above her crib in the castle from which she was kidnapped. Pascal is a little touch of home she does not consciously recognize as such. But as her confidante and alter-ego, he is also in tune with her desire for independence. When Rapunzel was a child, Pascal no doubt had childish qualities. As the fantasized companion of a teenager, he becomes a teenager too. He’s a chameleon in more ways than one.
An eighteen year old girl’s sense of fun is different from a child’s. Teenage Rapunzel throws open the tower’s window shutters, as though proclaiming herself to the world. Neither demure nor passive in any antiquated sense of femininity, she exhibits boundless energy in a game of hide and seek with her overmatched pal. Ferreting him out despite his best efforts to disguise himself, the tireless teen is eager for more, proposing an extension of their competition to the best twenty-three out of forty-five, which means they’ve already played twenty-two games.

As a like-minded but not identical fantasy companion, Pascal’s moods are not always in sync with Rapunzel’s. At first he is the meeker of the two. Then, suddenly, he becomes the bolder. Declining Rapunzel’s offer of yet another exhausting and, for him, scary game of hide and seek, he motions for her to come explore with him the world outside her tower. Now it’s Rapunzel’s turn to be scared, even though Pascal is merely expressing her suppressed desire to escape. She disguises her fear as indifference. But her phony excuse for remaining inside the tower is born of a child’s natural fear of change and the unknown: a fear Mother Gothel has for selfish reasons encouraged rather than helped her overcome. “I like it in here, and so do you,” Rapunzel insists. Speaking for Rapunzel’s inner rebel, Pascal rudely sticks out his tongue at her—a typically adolescent gesture. He does not prefer life confined to a tower, and despite her protest, neither does Rapunzel. She just isn’t ready to take that first big leap out of the tediously familiar into the mysterious unknown.

“My very chains and I grew friends, So much a long communion tends,” wrote Lord Byron in “The Prisoner of Chillon” (Byron, 406). “He loved Big Brother,” George Orwell remarked of his hero at the end of 1984 (Orwell, 311). The fairy tale tone of Tangled is far removed from Byron’s poem and Orwell’s novel, but the situation and sentiments are similar. Pascal the
anthropomorphized chameleon is not only Rapunzel's imaginary pal, with whom she can share her life and soothe her loneliness, he also pinch hits for the repressed part of Rapunzel that wants to be free and independent. She stands on Joseph Campbell's "threshold of adventure," but hasn't yet the courage to cross over it. And when she is at last ready to do so, Pascal will not be her guide. Instead, it will be a complete and rather frightening stranger.

Striving to make life within the confines of her tower as exciting as possible, Rapunzel infuses creative energy into every routine, including her assigned chores, and every square inch of her overly familiar home. Pretty flowers decorate the tower windowsill. She has painted and repainted the bare walls of her prison with murals depicting the world outside, as she imagines it. "This girl is making her walls go away by painting on them... all of her subconscious desires and all of her conscious desires," commented animator and executive producer Glen Keane. By the time she becomes a teenager, "there is no more room left on this wall any longer. Her next step has to be to go out" (Kurtti, 50). Rapunzel's unbelievably long hair, dual symbol of both her youthful vitality and her captivity, becomes a versatile rope with which she flies around her circumscribed world like a swashbuckling pirate. Far ahead of her time, at least in her fantasies, she strums her guitar like a rock star.

But she also engages in the more traditional activities of knitting, baking and cleaning, transforming each one into a tiny adventure. She balances pies on her head and rides scrub brushes like ice skates as she cleans the floor. A frying pan hanging on the wall could be a symbol of her domestic servitude, if not the servitude of all women, especially in the olden days. But like so many things in Tangled, it too undergoes a reversal.

Ballet, chess, books, darts, sketching, ventriloquism, exercise and climbing help fill the time
Rapunzel cannot fill with exploration, discovery and making new acquaintances. Pascal is her partner in each of these activities. Her work on a jigsaw puzzle reminds me of Susan Alexander wiling away her time as a virtual prisoner in the confines of her husband’s cavernous castle, Xanadu, in Citizen Kane. Like Rapunzel, Susan is kept in a childlike state of existence by a domineering, immature older character. Susan’s puzzles depicted exotic, far-away places to which she escaped in her fantasies. Rapunzel’s puzzle depicts a bluebird, which now and in later scenes is her symbol of the freedom for which she yearns but still fears. Both characters eventually achieve independence—Rapunzel more successfully.

Rapunzel can’t help but look a little bored as she pulls the same old Botany book off the same old shelf. “Stuck in the same place I’ve always been. Wondering when will my life begin,” strikes a melancholy note within an otherwise celebratory ode to youthful energy. The movie distills Rapunzel’s daily routine, and her attempt to infuse it with drama and meaning, into a passionately lighthearted song that encourages us to feel this young woman’s remarkable power, no matter how bottled up it may be. “When Will My Life Begin” is a potent musical mix of hope and despair: hope defying despair and despair threatening to extinguish hope.

Rapunzel can fend off the blues only so long with such activities. “Brush and brush and brush and brush my hair” betrays the tedium and frustration growing within her. All that beautiful hair has become a burden. It cannot be cut without losing its magic, so it’s been unnaturally prolonged. As her song ends, Rapunzel stands in the center of the floor and flings that mass of hair around her, forming nearly concentric circles of confinement. She looks up at us, now positioned far above her like a gigantic and all-powerful parent, with a forlorn expression on her face. Hope does not spring eternal. And when it reaches its limit, it can twist itself into
something grotesque. Something resembling Mother Gothel.

Rapunzel is part young woman and still part little girl: slightly pigeon-toed, naïve and afraid one moment, savvy and confident the next. All emotions are at play within her. The filmmakers, including Mandy Moore as the voice of Rapunzel, do a wonderful job of portraying that precariously balanced mix. She’s at a point in her life when she either escapes Mother Gothel’s domination or risks becoming a grim reflection of her jailer. “Now that I’m older, mother might just let me go,” she sings hopefully at the conclusion of her song. “Let me go” has a double meaning: let her go see the floating lights, but in a broader sense grant her control of her own life. Rapunzel goes to the open window with its view of bright sunshine and blue skies. Then she turns back to the tower’s comparatively gloomy interior. Adding to her murals, she paints a golden pathway to the floating lights in her painted sky, making something liberating of her confining hair. But heavy red curtains, similar in color to the red dress in which Mother Gothe! will soon appear, bracket Rapunzel’s painted dream, trapping her within their heavy embrace.

Among the possessions on Rapunzel’s bookshelf is a doll with blond hair. Like any child, she creates adventure stories and uses surrogates to cast herself in them. Kids with toy soldiers and dinosaurs do the same thing. Drawings that look like Rapunzel, surrounded by depictions of plants and animals from the world outside, decorate the walls of her prison. Rapunzel does with art what Flynn Rider does with words by narrating the movie and, as we discover later, by telling adventure stories to younger orphans and imagining himself playing the hero. We all play that game. Rapunzel’s tower cannot begin to contain the wealth of her growing imagination or her growing desires. She needs a bigger canvas.

The mirror inside the cover of Rapunzel’s paint box is, like her self-portraits on the walls and
her doll, another example of seeing one’s self as someone else—that is, from an emotional
distance. Another surrogate is the blonde-haired mask with which she momentarily frightens
poor Pascal. Speaking of whom, the little green lizard serves as Rapunzel’s playmate, best friend,
confidante, girlfriend (she uses him as a dressing dummy), and who knows what else as she
grows older. It’s a multiple role whose many shoes the little guy cannot possibly fill. He is an
inanimate object or a pet brought to life by a child’s imagination to play whatever role that child
requires.

If Rapunzel’s world is overfilled with boundaries, Flynn Rider’s world seems, at first glance,
boundless. Descending the high wall of his tower in the village from which Rapunzel was
kidnapped, he leaps effortlessly from rooftop to rooftop. But that initial impression is misleading.
Flynn’s freedom is shackled by his own insecurities. And like Rapunzel’s, those insecurities are
rooted in childhood. In later scenes we learn that he grew up an orphan. Let’s try the Citizen
Kane analogy again. Like Susan Alexander, Rapunzel endures too much mothering. Call it
smothering. As a result she’s ignorant of the world, full of false expectations and excessive fears.
Like Charles Foster Kane, Flynn Rider grows up without parents. Compensating for that
emptiness, he builds his sense of well-being around reckless adventuring, the compulsive
acquisition of material wealth regardless of how it’s obtained, and the avoidance of any
emotional intimacy with other human beings who might, like his parents, abandon him. But such
a colorful lifestyle comes at a price.

If Mother Gothel is the cynical, isolated, self-obsessed person Rapunzel could become if she
doesn’t escape her tower, Flynn Rider has his own ominous shadow doubles. The Stabbington
Brothers, his partners in crime, are the older, humorless, more ruthless, less redeemable brutes
the still likeable rogue Flynn could become if he continues to live life as he has been. It’s a life built on childhood fantasy, which unlike Rapunzel’s fantasies leads him away from the light.

As he jumps across rooftops, Flynn spots the enormous castle belonging to the King and Queen. To him it embodies on a spectacular scale the wealth and security he never had as a child. He wants a castle of his own, believing it to be the key to happiness. It’s his Xanadu. Little does he suspect what a hollow paradise it’s become for its occupants, the royal parents who lost their daughter nearly two decades earlier. Their abiding love for and devotion to their child is a family bond Flynn cannot even begin to understand, because he never experienced it.

A hand belonging to one of Flynn’s partners yanks him out of his daydream and back to the criminal caper that might secure for him what he craves. But the size and power of that hand reminds us that Flynn is not a free man. And if the Stabbington Brothers are dark reflections of Flynn, it is, in a sense, his own hand that drags him back into a life of crime.

Reminiscent of the jewel heist in the 1964 caper movie Topkapi, executed by adult characters with more than a few emotional problems of their own, Flynn is lowered by rope into a huge, heavily guarded chamber festooned with images of royal sunflowers. He has come to steal the jeweled crown of the lost Princess, whose sad story is of no concern to him. He cares nothing about the additional pain he will inflict on Rapunzel’s already heartbroken parents. The chamber itself, its grandeur and the immaculately uniformed soldiers standing rigidly at attention as they guard a symbol of the kidnapped Princess, is a melancholy testament to the incapacitating grief of the King and Queen, who remain largely passive characters until near the end of the story. Unlike their daughter, they have not channeled their unhappiness into anything positive. They are frozen in place by their grief.
The chamber housing Rapunzel’s crown resembles a mausoleum—a memorial for the dead. In fairy tale language it might symbolize the King and Queen’s attempt to keep their precious little girl forever an innocent, dependent child. Viewed in that way, it is their well-intentioned yet equally damaging version of Mother Gothel’s more blatantly selfish tower. Rapunzel’s real parents make a sacred object of the royal crown they placed on her pretty head when she was an infant. When parents and daughter are at last reunited, Rapunzel will no longer be that child.

Flynn’s intrusion into the crown chamber involves more than his relentless pursuit of wealth. What loving, protective parents don’t see their child as royalty, and all potential suitors, including Flynn, as unworthy commoners? It comes with the job of being a parent. In fairy tales long past, the crown might signify Rapunzel’s virginity, hopefully to be taken only by a man worthy of her. Love and sex are certainly implied ingredients in Tangled. Marriage and its rewards will be part of Rapunzel’s and Eugene’s crowning achievement. But Rapunzel’s virginity is less significant than is her making the right match with a deserving man. And Flynn Rider is certainly not the right man, yet. More importantly, Rapunzel’s crown symbolizes her independence—her right and ability to make life’s big decisions for herself, including the choice of a mate.

Unlike the royal prince who pursues and eventually marries Rapunzel in the Brothers Grimm version of the fairy tale, Flynn Rider is a commoner, an orphan, a thief and a liar. He begins the story unworthy of Rapunzel’s affection. But when he eventually becomes worthy, it’s because he finds, thanks to the heroine, his better self, not because he discovers royal blood in his lineage. Luckily for Flynn, the guards all face away from the enshrined crown, their attention focused on the room’s official entrances and exits rather than on the hole Flynn and his partners illicitly
opened in the ceiling. As effortlessly as he gained access to the chamber, Rider snatches and
crown and is gone, but not before cheekily betraying his presence by commenting out loud when
one of the guards sneezes. He cannot resist playing the wisecracking rogue, like his namesake,
Errol Flynn, in any number of movies. Never taking anything too seriously and never daunted by
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. It’s a comforting, idealized role he read about in a
story long ago and has passionately embraced ever since. But how long can he get away with it,
physically or emotionally?

By the time the guard turns around, Flynn has already escaped through the ceiling. Fleeing the
island village across a bridge, he trumpets victory to his dour companions. “Gentlemen, this is a
very big day!”, because it has seen the potential fulfillment of his childhood dream. And like
Rapunzel’s enthusiastic performance of her daily routine in the tower, the flair and optimism
Flynn brings to his crime almost seduces us into thinking he’s on the right track.

Cut immediately to Rapunzel in her tower. “This is a very big day, Pascal” she announces,
unwittingly mimicking Flynn Rider. Compare and contrast the dreams of hero and heroine.
Flynn dreams of material wealth obtained by any means necessary, expressing his happiness to
co-conspirators who couldn’t care less about his dream. He and the Stabbington Brothers are
nothing more than allies of convenience. Rapunzel, by contrast, dreams of freedom and home,
sharing her hopes with a friend who sincerely cares about her but is probably more a figment of
her imagination than he is real.

Doing what he can to encourage Rapunzel, Pascal assumes a proud, confident stance.
Curiously, that stance resembles the pose Hiccup’s dragon, Toothless, assumes near the end of
How to Train Your Dragon 2, when he accepts his new role as the Alpha Male of his kind.
Pascal is Rapunzel’s miniature dragon. He and Toothless are reflections of the heroine and hero in their respective stories.

Rapunzel gasps with childish glee at the sound of Mother Gothel returning home, because she now has an opportunity to plead her case for greater freedom. Standing on the ground outside the tower, the older woman complains, “I’m not getting any younger down here,” with wry double meaning unsuspected by her daughter. What sounds like a routine parental complaint about a typically tardy teenager carries a deeper, darker truth. Rapunzel is literally the source of youthful rejuvenation for Mother Gothel. The teenager’s high hopes that she will at last be allowed outside the tower to pursue the floating lights fly in the face of an obsession in Gothel the teenager does not even suspect.

Mother Gothel ascends the tower on a rope of Rapunzel’s long hair. Thanks to a low angle, rising camera and exhilarating musical accompaniment, we ascend with her, sharing her experience of youthful vitality illicitly obtained. On her way up she glances at the surrounding scenery, clearly enjoying the power Rapunzel’s magic hair gives her. As she enters the tower through the window, we see a full-sized dressing dummy behind Rapunzel. The teenager is, in effect, surrounded by Mother Gothel, who like the dummy is a phony. But on the wall behind the dummy is Rapunzel’s painting of a bluebird--the liberated creature she hopes to become, in spite of Mother Gothel’s objections.

Mother Gothel goes immediately to a mirror to gaze at her own image. She relishes the youthful appearance of her reflection. It’s her addiction. Rapunzel’s hair is the drug that feeds it. Deception and confinement are two of the methods by which she maintains control of that drug. A more insidious method is emotional manipulation. She keeps Rapunzel off-balance, confused
and full of self-doubt by repeatedly praising and then belittling the girl in almost the same breath. She remarks on the beautiful, confident young woman she sees in the mirror. We and Rapunzel assume she’s referring to Rapunzel, until she adds, “Oh look, you’re here too,” then laughs it off as a joke. This is another of the film’s moments of false expectation. Rapunzel reacts as if she’s experienced this give-and-take-away routine many times before, and is weary of it. Mother Gothel strokes her own vanity at the same time she demeans Rapunzel. The two actions go hand-in-hand. In order to justify her crimes against Rapunzel, of whose youth and beauty she is pathologically jealous, Mother Gothel must reduce the girl to insignificance. Jack Torrence does the same to his wife and son in *The Shining*, a horror film with strong fairy tale elements.

Noticing a small age spot on the back of her hand, Mother Gothel asks Rapunzel to sing for her. The teenager complies, as she always has in the past. But this time her willingness to do so is compounded by her desire to curry favor with Mother Gothel before making her special birthday request. Impatient, like many teenagers, she does everything too fast. Mother Gothel, suspecting the nature of Rapunzel’s request even before she makes it, evades the issue. She won’t even admit that her daughter is having another birthday, which of course reminds her that she too is getting older.

At Pascal’s urging, which means the urging of her stronger self, Rapunzel perseveres, blurting out her wish that mother take her to see the mysterious floating lights in person. “I have to know what they are!” she pleads with insatiable, frustrated curiosity. She senses they have a personal connection to her, because they appear every year on her birthday. But asking her mother to take an excursion outside the tower is cheating a little. Rapunzel must make that journey by herself, or with someone who is *not* her parent. Otherwise she cannot achieve independence.
Mother Gothel reacts by closing the window shutters and skylight that Rapunzel opened earlier. Fulfilling her daughter’s dream would spell doom for the mother’s. No self-sacrifice for Gothel. But her attempt to reduce the floating lights to ordinary stars in the night sky is undercut by Rapunzel’s retort that she has charted stars and they do not behave like the floating lights. Years of ivory tower isolation and observation has rendered the teenager a more formidable debater than she was as a young girl. She’s “a little analytical, as if she’s documenting things that she’s discovering. . . learning things,” as Glen Keane describes it (Kurtti, 50). This time the bad parent will have to take more vigorous steps to quell her daughter’s dreams.

“Mother Knows Best” is Mother Gothel’s exaggerated justification for her overprotective treatment of Rapunzel, and a challenge to Rapunzel’s “When Will My Life Begin?” “Never!” is essentially the answer. Playing the unappreciated, martyred parent to the hilt in her fantasy, Gothel deflects her own guilt onto her daughter, making Rapunzel feel like a naïve, ungrateful child. “Soon. Not yet,” she promises freedom to the young girl, having no intention of keeping that promise. Instead, she does all she can to reinforce Rapunzel’s dwindling fear of the outside world. “Mother knows best,” she insists while blowing out, with the same vampire-like sweep of her cape with which she kidnapped Rapunzel eighteen years earlier, the candles lining the staircase on which she stands. Candle-making was one of Rapunzel’s routine activities in the film’s opening song. The teenager re-lights a few of those candles, but Mother Gothel gleefully snuffs them out too, with all the grotesque enthusiasm of Ethel Merman belting out a Broadway hit song. Like Flynn Rider, she lacks neither confidence nor style.

Mother Gothel employs darkness to scare the wits out of Rapunzel with the terrifying prospect of encountering everything from “ruffians and thugs” to “the plague” out there in the big world.
She is now the story-teller, complete with special effects. A green lantern lends her face the sickly pallor of a deadly disease. She re-deploys a mop head to create “large bugs.” She draws a scary, fang-toothed man on the floor to warn her daughter away from all men. She even borrows Rapunzel’s own surrogate, the blonde-haired doll, to illustrate the menace of cannibals, tossing the toy into a frying pan. Rapunzel will later employ that same pan as an expression of the fear Mother Gothel reinforces in her now. Surprisingly, and ironically, the pan will do some genuine good to one head (Flynn Rider’s) upon which it lands.

Encouraging Rapunzel to fear everything the outside world has to offer, Mother Gothel once again pads her argument by debasing the girl herself, describing her as “gullible,” “naïve,” “grubby,” “ditzy” and “chubby.” Chubby? Rapunzel is hardly that. But Mother Gothel will use any insult to discourage the teenager’s increasing confidence and passion to become the master of her own life.

At one point during “Mother Knows Best,” Rapunzel hides in a cocoon made of her own hair, finding security in the very symbol of her extended childhood. In a panic, she hugs Mother Gothel tightly for protection from all the alleged terrors lurking just outside their sheltering tower. But the mother to whom she clings turns out to be only Mother Gothel’s cape hanging on the dressing dummy. Like many through not all of the dangers she conjurs in Rapunzel’s imagination, Mother Gothel too is a fraud. An illusion projected before Rapunzel’s eyes ever since the girl was an infant. A fraud it will take Rapunzel considerable time and effort to expose. But for now she locates the real Mother Gothel and runs into her arms, seeking protection from danger, like any frightened child.

After reducing her rebellious teenager to a terrified, needly child once more, Mother Gothel
concludes her song with a stern command. “Don’t ever ask to leave this tower again” breaks her earlier promise to grant the girl freedom “soon, not yet.” Rapunzel never had a chance. But immediately after crushing her daughter’s growing spirit of independence, mother assures the girl of her abiding love. Sweet follows sour. It’s a little ritual in which Rapunzel is obliged to participate time and again. Mother Gothel declares, “I love you very much, dear.” Rapunzel responds, “I love you more.” Mother Gothel adds, “I love you most.” As always, mother gets the last word, reassuring both her daughter and herself that she is the better person.

After putting up a spirited battle, Rapunzel concedes defeat, as she did when she was a child sitting by the fireplace while Mother Gothel brushed her long hair. But this time she is profoundly unhappy about it. “I’ll be here” she remarks sadly as Mother Gothel departs on another outing, referring to her daughter as “my flower,” which would be a term of endearment if it didn’t slyly refer back to the glowing flower that imparted magical powers to Rapunzel’s golden hair. “My” signifies Mother Gothel’s possession of the younger woman. “Flower” reduces Rapunzel to the magic that is her only value to the older woman. By keeping Rapunzel perpetually a child, Mother Gothel remains perpetually young herself.

In an extreme long shot at the end of this scene of thwarted dreams, we see Rapunzel’s long hair hanging out the tower window, wafting in the breeze but not quite reaching the ground below. To the right of that golden ribbon is a thin waterfall cascading down a high cliff, presumably flowing into a stream, out of the canyon and to regions beyond. Hair and stream are parallel yet contradictory images of confinement and freedom.

Deep in the forest we encounter more “Wanted” posters of Flynn Rider flashing his roguish grin and the Stabbington Brothers looking grimly humorless. Spotting his likeness, Rider is upset
about its misshapen nose. Like Mother Gothel, though to a lesser extent, he’s vain about his appearance. Then again, he will prove to be a man of many faces, figuratively speaking. “You guys look amazing” he flatters his companions, obviously lying. They couldn’t care less. Neither they nor Flynn feel any real loyalty to one another.

Chased by a posse of the King’s soldiers, Flynn and his cohorts flee until they encounter a dead end in a steep ravine—a miniature version of Rapunzel’s dead-end canyon. Rider asks the brothers to give him a boost up and over the obstacle. Distrustful, they refuse to let him out of their grasp while he possesses the satchel containing the stolen crown. He feigns hurt feelings at their lack of trust. It’s all an act, and not a very convincing one at that. The stone-faced brothers remain unsympathetic. Flynn gives them the satchel. But he proves a superior con artist. Climbing to the top of the barrier by not so accidently stepping on the face of the brother who gives him a boost, he flaunts the satchel he cleverly snatched back. Then he escapes, leaving his furious ex-partners to their fate. Flynn’s stylish, humorous manner of cheating them superficially renders his betrayal a little less unsavory. Yet it’s a pretty despicable thing to do, and characteristically selfish. Still, one gets the impression that, given the same opportunity, the Stabbington brothers would do the same, or worse, to him.

The King’s posse gives chase, its commander shouting orders to the men behind him: “Return that satchel at any cost!” “Yes, sir,” they bark back. The commander’s white horse mimics his rider by neighing sternly at the horses of the other soldiers, and they respond like their riders. The parallel between man and animal is forged. Maximus, even more than his rider, embodies a strict, uncompromising enforcement of the law.

The pursuing soldiers shoot arrows at the fleeing thief, nearly hitting him. He’s chosen a
precarious lifestyle, but he’s pretty good at it, swinging full circle on a conveniently placed vine (fairy tale wish-fulfillment at its best), nimbly knocking the commanding officer off his white stallion and taking the reins for himself. “Come on, fleabag! Forward!” he insults and commands the horse. As with the Stabbington Brothers earlier and Rapunzel in the future, he has no respect for anyone other than himself. And that lack of respect for others often leads to arrogance. The horse, named Maximus, is fiercely loyal to his original rider, or more precisely to the laws his rider incompetently championed. Screeching to a halt, he refuses to obey Flynn. In the fairy tale logic of Tangled, Max is very human-like in his intelligence. Jin Kim, one of the film’s animators, likens the horse’s head and neck to a chess piece (Kurtti, 108). Like the knight in chess, Maximus embodies a rigid code of ethics. He is the polar opposite of Mother Gothel and the Stabbington Brothers, as grimly inflexible in his righteousness as they are in their criminal pursuit of selfish gain.

Flynn and Max too are nearly opposites. Max is the conscience Flynn rejects and represses. Max is morality without understanding, fanaticism without forgiveness. The dreams of both characters are out of whack. When they meet and do battle they both end up in extreme peril. Fighting for the crown that is precious to them for different reasons, they find themselves perched on a tree branch overhanging a cliff. The branch breaks, sending both plummeting to what would surely be, outside the logic of a fairy tale, their deaths hundreds of feet below. Law breaker and law enforcer utter identical screams of terror, for once sharing a common outlook. It’s a hilarious moment of unexpected solidarity. Then the falling branch splits on a rock, sending the characters in slightly different directions as they disappear into the mist below.

Flynn and Max survive their falls miraculously unharmed. Fairy tales are free to break rules
that normally govern the physical world. But good fairy tales adhere more closely to emotional truths. Recovering quickly from his plunge into a deep valley, suffering only a mouthful of grass, Max immediately resumes his crusade to track down Flynn Rider and bring him to justice. No mercy. Not even a moment’s rest to contemplate his close call with death. In fact, he felt perfectly justified, moments earlier, stomping on Flynn’s hands as Rider clung desperately to the underside of the not yet broken tree limb. After all, the “Wanted” poster did read “Dead or Alive.” Max has little compunction about killing a thief. Sniffing the ground like a bloodhound, the horse charges off in search of his obsession.

Flynn escapes capture by happy chance, stumbling across a crevice in the rocks, concealed by overhanging vines. His escape route leads him into a beautiful canyon with a soaring tower at the far end of it. Viewed from behind, in a shot depicting both Rider and the distant tower, Flynn unwittingly strikes a clichéd heroic stance. If we didn’t know about his thievery and selfishness, we could almost surmise from that image that he is a brave hero on the verge of rescuing a flawless damsel in distress. Fortunately neither hero nor heroine live up, or down, to that stereotype. They’re much more interesting, flawed characters. Grass and tree branches sway gently in the breeze, enhancing Flynn’s false impression of the tower as a potential haven of solitude and security. He’s like that child who, in Bruno Bettelheim’s recollection, found comfort in Rapunzel’s tower as shelter from a world where parental protection was lacking.

Seeking refuge from his relentless pursuer, Flynn climbs the tower using arrows fired at him previously by the soldiers. He’s a clever, resourceful thief. Nor does he lack courage, especially when it comes to saving his own hide. Once inside the tower, he closes the window shutters to keep prying eyes from peering in, the way Mother Gothel closed them to keep Rapunzel’s eyes
from peering out. For Rider the tower is, if only temporarily, a sanctuary from the dangerous outside world. For its permanent occupant it is both a prison, like the one Flynn hopes to avoid, and a shelter from what Mother Gothel warned her was outside. Different points of view are about to collide.

Overconfident again, Flynn examines the satchel containing the stolen crown. He smiles and remarks to himself, “Alone at last.” There, in a nutshell, you have his current dream: solitude, self-reliance and material wealth. “Alone at last” could be the exclamation of a romantic couple finding blissful seclusion from other people. Not for Rider, whose beloved companion in this secluded spot is a stolen, lifeless object promising great wealth that for him has long since displaced any dream of companionship, trust and love. When he coos “Alone at last” to a lifeless crown, it’s both funny and sad.

Clang! Flynn’s smug grin freezes into an expression of stupefied surprise. He collapses, unconscious, to the floor. There is no guarantee of security in life—certainly not within a dream like his. But it will require several more blows to the head, plus an intimate acquaintance such as he has thus far scrupulously avoided, before he learns that lesson.

Flynn is knocked out by Rapunzel using an object that, ironically, symbolizes her involuntary servitude. On a broader level, a frying pan might even be considered a symbol of the cultural oppression of women in general. Curiously, it’s what Marion uses to defend herself in Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981). But Rapunzel’s surprising display of power is immediately followed by a little girl scream and a fearful flight to safety, behind the maternal dressing dummy she once mistook for Mother Gothel. Rapunzel’s reaction to Flynn’s intrusion into her fortress is rooted in her fear of the outside world and all its inhabitants. It is one thing to fantasize about happy
encounters with the unknown (Rapunzel’s painted murals), but quite another to experience them.

Physical power and emotional weakness combine in a single blow. The emotional weaknesses of both hero and heroine are on display simultaneously. Like mutual foes Flynn and Max reacting the same way to the prospect of imminent death when they plunge off a cliff, Flynn’s expression of stunned helplessness hilariously complements Rapunzel childish squeak of panic. Both characters are a mass of contradictions yet to be reconciled.

Flynn lies flat on his face in an unflattering posture. Rapunzel summons the courage to approach and investigate. With Pascal’s encouragement, she subjects him to Mother Gothel’s fear test. But she’s careful to use her frying pan, not her hands, to touch the dreaded stranger. No, Flynn doesn’t have fangs like the male face Gothel drew on the floor during “Mother Knows Best.” Rapunzel is pleasantly surprised, intrigued, perhaps even attracted to Flynn. She moves closer, hesitantly. It’s another moment of false expectation. Has she fallen instantly, madly in love with the hero who has no fangs? Not by a long shot. When one of his eyes pops open, Rapunzel cracks him over the head again with her frying pan. By cutting to a shot outside the tower and only letting us hear the collision of metal against skull, the camera renders the blow more amusing to us, though certainly not to Rider. Human fallibility triumphs over compassion and attraction. Neither character is able to overcome his or her flaws with magical ease. It's a long road they must travel first, together, before they learn to trust each other.

Mother Gothel’s fear of old age and death led her to imprison Rapunzel within the tower. Rapunzel’s fear of strangers leads her to imprison Flynn inside her closet within that same tower. Her difficulty stuffing Rider’s limp body into an armoire is wonderful slapstick comedy, but also makes several larger dramatic points. First, it reinforces our impression of Flynn’s vulnerability,
undercutting his previous and future arrogance. Second, it reinforces our impression of Rapunzel’s inexperience dealing with people from outside her world. But with the help of her sometimes burdensome hair, which years of familiarity has taught her to use in remarkably creative ways, she succeeds. Not, however, without one surprising, humiliating setback.

Thinking she’s successfully stashed Flynn in her closet, she turns her back on it, smugly grins and dusts off her hands in triumph. Unfortunately, she forgot to secure the closet door. It opens and the unconscious intruder falls out on top of her, knocking her to the floor. Flynn may not possess fangs, but Rapunzel is nowhere near ready for such close physical contact with a man such as she’s been taught to fear. The fact that Flynn is unconscious when he lands on Rapunzel safely precludes any overt suggestion of sexuality. But the hint of it is there, perhaps in Rapunzel’s paranoid mind. She emits another girlish squeak of dismay. Progress comes in small steps, with many setbacks.

Both characters appear, at times, silly and vulnerable—objects of our amusement. But Rapunzel is nothing if not persistent. With the help of a broom, like the frying pan another potential symbol of female confinement, she pushes Flynn back into the closet and blocks the doors with a chair. She notices several of his fingers sticking out between the closed doors—another undignified moment for the swashbuckling rogue—and pushes them back into their prison.

The sudden realization that she’s got a person in her closet yields first consternation, then amazement, and finally pride. Rapunzel looks at her own reflection in the same mirror in which Mother Gothel earlier admired herself and insulted the teenager. She knows now she is not the clumsy, helpless ditz her mother insisted she was. Now it’s her turn to be overconfident, as Flynn Rider was when he first arrived in the tower. Twirling her frying pan like a Wild West
gunslinger might his gun, she accidently conks herself in the head with it, resulting in a painful little lesson about the illusion of power and misplaced pride. She has not yet mastered her world, despite her initial triumph over one unwelcome intruder.

Rapunzel notices the stranger’s satchel lying on the floor. Finding the crown inside, she has no idea what it is. Neither does Pascal. Is it a bracelet? No. A magnifying glass? No. Placing the crown on her head, Rapunzel scrutinizes herself again in the mirror. Is she on the verge of a monumental awakening? A sudden realization of who she is and from where she came? Rapunzel, we (the slowly advancing camera) and Pascal appear awe-struck. She looks beautiful, and the crown seems made for her. Is she about to become a real Princess and take charge of her life? It’s another breathless moment of false anticipation, broken when Pascal shakes his head “No.” The young teenager is not yet ready to claim her crown of independence. And before Rapunzel can ponder the matter further, she is interrupted by the sound of Mother Gothel calling to her from outside the tower. She quickly hides the crown and satchel in a nearby pot. But her discovery of the crown of the Lost Princess in this scene re-defines that object as primarily symbolic of Rapunzel’s potential for maturity, while retaining its previous definitions as the key to Flynn Rider’s material security and a painful reminder to Rapunzel’s parents of their long lost baby girl.

Mother Gothel is a clever villain. Having recently beaten down another of her daughter’s increasingly determined rebellions, she again employs the old bad cop/good cop routine to placate the restless teenager. She returns to the tower with parsnips to make Rapunzel’s favorite meal, hazel nut soup. It’s a bribe aimed at the lingering urge within Rapunzel, or any of us for that matter, to remain forever a child, supplied with all physical needs by an all-powerful parent.
It’s the very thing, we later discover, Flynn Rider was denied when he was that needy child. No one ever made hazel nut soup for him.

Mother Gothel announces her birthday gift in a grand manner, expecting Rapunzel to show proper, abject gratitude in return. Then, predictably, she follows reward with criticism. Rapunzel tries to stick up for herself this time. “Oh, come on!” sounds like the rebellious teen she aspires to be. She boldly attempts to re-open debate about the floating lights, until Mother Gothel squelches it with an angry declaration, “You are not leaving this tower! Ever!!”

Slumping into a throne-like chair, Mother Gothel melodramatically plays the exhausted, put-upon parent to Rapunzel’s defiant brat. Just how much of her own propaganda does she believe? Is she as capable of fooling herself as she’s been of pulling the wool over Rapunzel’s eyes for almost eighteen years? The need to justify one’s selfishness by re-defining it as a sacrifice hints at the potential for a conscience, if not a very strong one.

As proof of her competence to deal with the outside world, Rapunzel was about to reveal the captured stranger in her closet. The severity of Mother Gothel’s anger, with its almost visceral threat of violence, causes her to back away from that plan. Which is fortunate for Flynn Rider, who if discovered by Gothel would certainly meet with violence far worse than a frying pan upside his head. But is it intimidation alone that keeps Rapunzel from revealing Flynn’s presence? The increasingly savvy teenager is learning the art of deception that her bogus parent has so long practiced against her.

Glancing at her own painting of the floating lights that represent her dreams, then at the closet door concealing the forbidden stranger whose capture seems to validate her right to be free, Rapunzel quickly improvises a new plan of action. Stepping in front of and concealing the
suspiciously placed chair that props the closet doors shut, Rapunzel presents her modified birthday wish to Mother Gothel. Instead of a trip to see the floating lights, or “stars” as she respectfully concedes, she would prefer a new set of paints. Such a gift which would, she cleverly implies, keep her content and docile inside the tower. Not coincidently, obtaining that gift requires Mother Gothel to be absent from the tower for three days--sufficient time for the birthday girl to execute Plan B. Gothel reluctantly consents. For her it’s an acceptable compromise to maintain overall control over Rapunzel and her magic hair. Rapunzel adds a bit of phony reassurance, “I know I’m safe as long as I’m here,” intended to placate her paranoid mother. An affectionate hug, a basket of food, and a repetition of the “I love you more/I love you most” ritual deceitfully sends Mother Gothel on her way, confident that she retains power over her daughter.

The moment Gothel is out of sight, Rapunzel releases her prisoner: Step One of her scheme to defy mother. But courage is a fitful, fickle commodity. Taking a deep breath to fortify herself, holding tightly to her powerful frying pan and hiding again behind the dressing dummy that represents the security Mother Gothel provides, Rapunzel removes the chair from in front of the closet doors.

The door opens and Flynn Rider, still unconscious, falls face first onto the floor, his undignified backside pointing in the air. Sliding forward until he lies flat, he is hardly a portrait of self-control. Rapunzel warily approaches him, the dressing dummy still visible behind her. This is an act of considerable courage, confronting the mysterious, potentially menacing stranger who has invaded her home.

Ingeniously employing her hair again, Rapunzel lashes Flynn to the chair and pulls him into
the sunlight in the middle of the room. Curiously, Flynn’s chair sits over a golden sun flower painted on the floor, presumably by Rapunzel. Is that painting based on a dim memory from her infancy? It soon transpires that Flynn is indeed the key with which she hopes to unlock the tower and travel to see the floating lights. But in a way neither Rapunzel nor Flynn anticipate, he eventually supplies her with a new and much better dream, just as she will replace his dream of material security contained in his satchel.

Not surprisingly, Rapunzel’s first physical contact with Flynn occurs through a surrogate. Pascal tries to awaken the prisoner with slaps of his hand and tail. After each, he timidly retreats, echoing Rapunzel’s trepidation. But he’s also persistent and resourceful, again like Rapunzel. Growing bolder, he sticks his long, wet, lizard tongue into the stranger’s ear, producing a sensation sufficiently unpleasant to restore consciousness. Flynn quickly realizes that he’s tied to a chair with hair. Like a lizard tongue in his ear, it’s not something he could easily anticipate, account for or know how to deal with.

Rapunzel’s first words to Flynn are bold and forceful. “Struggling is pointless.” But she speaks them timidly, while hiding deep in shadows far up in the tower’s rafters. “I know why you’re here and I’m not afraid of you” is pure bluff. She has no clue why Flynn came to her tower, though she suspects a reason, based on the fear Mother Gothel imparted to her. And she is definitely afraid of him. Yet she courageously overcomes that fear. That’s the whole point of this movie. Despite her fears, Rapunzel does what’s necessary to pursue her dreams.

Descending to the floor, Rapunzel hesitantly steps out of the shadows. Visible behind her is the ominous shape of a huge spider she’s painted on the wall. The spider represents her terror of the outside world, now embodied more directly by her captive. Though still brandishing her frying
pan, Rapunzel reveals herself to the stranger, who is surprised to see a beautiful young woman standing before him. Gaining confidence, edging closer to Flynn, she demands to know who he is and how he found her.

Flynn seems dazzled for a moment, creating another of the film’s terrific moments of misleading expectations. Will he fall instantly in love with the heroine, give up his selfish ways and become her champion? He adopts a very earnest facial expression as he tells her, with uncharacteristic formality, “I know not who you are, nor how I came to find you. But may I just say …” What? That he loves her? That he will do anything to help her? No. The gallant tone of his language and voice are just a pretense to sway the emotions of what he assumes is a gullible young woman. The act becomes ludicrously obvious when he breaks into a smarmy smile and tries to charm her with, “Hi. How you doin’? The name’s Flynn Rider. How’s your day goin’?” Like his name, his performance is phony to the core, and unpleasantly reminiscent of Mother Gothel’s exaggerated mannerisms while protesting her sickening “wuv” (love) for Rapunzel earlier. Both con artists treat the young woman with disrespect. Fortunately, Rider’s intentions are never quite as ruthless as Mother Gothel’s, though he’s headed in that direction if he continues to pursue his current path.

Rapunzel is unmoved by Flynn’s charm offensive. Fear and distrust (obviously not always a weakness) outweigh any physical attraction she may feel. Sticking her frying pan in the stranger’s face, she demands more information than he gave. And she pronounces his name as though she doubts its veracity. Smart girl. So Flynn drops his gentleman act for the moment, referring to her contemptuously as “Blondie.” Rapunzel demands respect by disclosing her real name and expecting Flynn to use it. He doesn’t, reducing it instead to the equivalent of a sneeze.
This is amusing banter between heroine and hero as they stumble towards some sort of mutual understanding, though not yet intimacy. But on another level it’s also indicative of Rapunzel’s quest for respect as a woman, an adult and a human being. Respect she’s never gotten from Mother Gothel, and will have to fight to earn in the big world outside her tower.

Flynn’s explanation of how he came to be in Rapunzel’s tower is not a lie. But it’s not the whole truth either, concealing from her his criminal activities and “Wanted” status. He reveals only as much as he believes necessary to get himself released, without being handed over to the authorities. Why should he trust his captor? But in the midst of his selective disclosures he remembers the missing satchel and becomes distracted. At this point in the story the stolen crown is much more important to Flynn than are Rapunzel, her captivity or her dreams of escape. What if she revealed to Flynn everything about her current situation, including the magical qualities of her hair? Would he help, desert or exploit her? After all, her magical hair could help him achieve, even more than the crown, his dream of great wealth and complete independence from other people? Just how close is Flynn Rider to being the Stabbington Brothers, or even Mother Gothel? It’s an interesting hypothetical to ponder. Fortunately, fairy tales usually afford the hero and/or heroine sufficient room for emotional growth before subjecting them to the ultimate test.

Rapunzel informs Flynn that she’s hidden his satchel somewhere he’ll never find it. Arms crossed, head tilted, glancing sideways at him, she appears downright cocky, the way Flynn looked before the first smack of her frying pan on the back of his head. Sure enough, after a quick survey of the room, the shrewd Mr. Rider correctly locates his satchel in a nearby pot, where she hid it from Mother Gothel. Is it a chamber pot? If so, what a fitting repository for Flynn’s crappy dream. He is far superior to Rapunzel as a con artist, but as quickly as the balance
of power shifts in his direction, it swings back to her. As happened earlier, the camera takes us outside the tower to hear, not see, another clunk of her frying pan against Rider’s skull. Black out. If we take a broad view of their relationship, including their eventual romance, Flynn is not yet worthy to enjoy the promise of Rapunzel’s crown, meaning Rapunzel herself. And she has no intention of trusting him with it. Of course, neither character consciously realizes yet that the crown is hers, which is a measure of how ignorant they are at this early stage of their acquaintance.

We and the camera reawaken with Flynn, again to a wet lizard tongue in his ear. He reacts as would we, with disgust. It’s the sort of prank one adolescent might inflict on another, though maybe with a finger instead of a tongue. And in some ways, Flynn and Rapunzel are still adolescents. “Now it’s hidden where you’ll never find it,” Rapunzel announces confidently, again. True, he won’t. But Mother Gothel, the film’s other experienced con artist, will, to the detriment of both Rapunzel and Flynn.

Circling Flynn with frying pan still in hand, Rapunzel again demands to know his purpose in scaling her tower. She assumes, based on Mother’s Gothel’s warnings, of which we are reminded by the manikin visible in the background, that he wants to exploit her magic hair. “The only thing I want to do with your hair is to get out of it. Literally!” he protests. True enough. But again it begs the question, what if he did know about its magical qualities? Would he consider profiting from it? And if the frying pan and the hidden satchel didn’t give Rapunzel a tactical advantage for the time being, would he have the slightest interest in helping her achieve freedom? It’s a collision of their competing dreams, with no assurance that he would willingly give up his for the sake of hers.
Pascal severely scrutinizes Flynn to evaluate the truth of his story. Flynn is properly intimidated by the unusual sight of a lizard allied with a teenage girl. The unlikely duo steps away for a moment to privately debate Flynn’s trustworthiness. Essentially, Rapunzel is debating with herself. Unlike her double, Rapunzel is inclined to believe Flynn, maybe because he doesn’t possess the fangs sported by Mother Gothel’s artistic depiction of all men. But even as Rapunzel expresses modest approval of him, we see Flynn, positioned far behind her, trying to free himself from her hair. When she turns back to face him, he prudently stops struggling, still the con artist. Unveiling the floating lights she painted on the wall of her prison, and in the process unintentionally dumping Flynn once more on his face (will the insults to his tender pride never cease?), she promises to release him if he will take her to see them. Flynn Rider thereby becomes the dark and loathsome herald who might guide the heroine to hidden treasures, as postulated by Joseph Campbell. The bargain hinges on his knowledge of the location of Rapunzel’s floating lights. Flynn identifies them as “the lantern thingies they do for the Princess.” With his proud nose (the feature whose distortion in the “Wanted” posters wounds his vanity throughout the film) flattened against the floor and his voice consequently pinched, he is again a comic portrait of frailty. But from that posture of weakness he comes up with the right answer to secure his freedom. There is, however, a catch. Half righting himself, thus restoring both his pretty nose and manly voice, he informs Rapunzel, in conveniently vague terms, that he and the kingdom to which she wants him to take her are “not exactly simpatico.” He refuses her offer.

Pascal advises Rapunzel to get tougher with her reluctant partner. She does so, but cleverly sweetens her offer by promising to return his satchel after they return from seeing the floating lights. Flynn sums it up. “Let me just get this straight. I take you to see the lanterns, bring you
back home, and you’ll give me back my satchel?" Sounds like a reasonable, straightforward contract. Rapunzel adds, “I promise. And when I promise something, I never ever break that promise. Ever!” But Flynn Rider grew up trusting no one. It’s possible he’s heard similar promises before, and gotten burned by them. The Stabbington Brothers would likely have cheated him out of his share of the crown if he hadn’t cheated them first. An arched eyebrow conveys his skepticism. Instead of accepting her proposal, Flynn subjects Rapunzel to another charm offensive, flashing what he calls his “smolder,” a facial expression he is certain will melt all resistance in her feminine heart. It’s a ridiculous blend of pinched eyebrows, squinty eyes and pursed lips. Rapunzel is unimpressed, to say the least. Her eyes narrow with suspicion. Sometimes her lack of experience with other people, especially men, works to her advantage.

Rationalizing and dismissing his failure as the trivial result of an “off” day, Flynn reluctantly agrees to Rapunzel’s deal. He cannot think of an easier way to regain possession of his treasure. In her girlish elation, which is a big part of her charm because she lacks the experience to suppress her enthusiasm, she again accidently tips Rider’s chair and pitches him face-first onto the floor. We don’t need to see the results to be amused. It’s sufficient to hear him complain, again in a pinched voice, “You broke my smolder!” Rapunzel sincerely apologizes for inflicting another indignity on him. Unlike Mother Gothel, she takes no pleasure from inflicting pain or humiliation on others. But in a larger sense, breaking Flynn’s “smolder” is Rapunzel’s first if unintentional step in breaking him of the bad habit of using his charm to deceive and manipulate other people for selfish purposes.

Bruno Bettelheim makes a distinction between compulsive, narrow fantasizing about the attainment of something we want and a healthier, more free-floating fantasy that “contains in
imaginary form a wide variety of issues also encountered in reality” (Bettelheim, 118).

Rapunzel’s fixation on the floating lights, now identified by Flynn Rider as lanterns, can only be her *first*, not her last step in gaining independence. It must lead to bigger, better dreams.

Playing the heroine’s reluctant guide, Flynn descends from the tower the same way he climbed it. Little does he suspect that he’s just begun a heroic journey of his own, with a naïve, annoying teenage girl as his wiser guide. Rapunzel, however, remains emotionally stuck at the window, her desire to explore the wider world battling an almost equal fear of what awaits her out there.

“Should I do it? No. Here I go” betrays her conflicted feelings. Perched on the threshold of a new and bigger life, she hesitates. With moral support from Pascal, the first of her helpers, she takes the plunge, descending effortlessly on her rope of hair, past the slow-moving Flynn Rider. Surprised at her unusual ability, as he will be by many things he discovers about Rapunzel, Flynn ducks to avoid getting clobbered. Rapunzel, not Flynn, takes the first plunge to escape from her emotional confinement by facing and overcoming her fears. She sets the example Flynn will eventually need to follow.

Rapunzel giggles with teenage glee as she descends to the ground, until she stops just inches above it, suddenly terrified of making that first, direct contact with the unknown. Tremendous enthusiasm collides with a sudden return of crushing self-doubt. She reaches out with a tentative foot. The grass feels good, so she plants both feet on the unfamiliar ground, slightly pigeon-toed again. It feels *great*. She’s experiencing the emotional extremes of many close encounters of the first kind.

Breaking into song, Rapunzel embraces the earth. Even *dirt* is something to celebrate when it signals liberation. A light summer breeze blows dandelion seeds to distant places. Her feet
encounter a puddle of water. “For the first time ever, I’m completely free!” she exults. Not quite true, as she soon discovers. But no one can deny the thrill of doing something new on your own for the first time. Especially something you were afraid to do. A real bluebird flies in front of her face, fulfilling the dream she previously painted on her prison wall. She rattles off an entire list of new things to do, all of them accompanied by “hair flying, heart pounding.” The camera tracks with her as she does them all in a rush. The tower recedes into the background, now ignored by its former inmate. The waterfall in the distance becomes a visual metaphor of Rapunzel’s newfound freedom instead of a sad counterpoint to her confinement. Soon she outruns even us as she bounds out of the camera frame. Her vivid green eyes match the green of the forest outside her tower. She is part of, not apart from, Nature. And Nature is part of her. To deny it is to trap one’s self in a tower.

Rapunzel’s first taste of independence resembles Hiccup’s first flights on a dragon he names Toothless, in How to Train Your Dragon. Both experiences are alternately frightening and exhilarating, filled with joy and doubt, success and failure, thrill and danger. Reaching the forest clearing from which Flynn Rider fled to the supposed safety of her tower a short time ago, Rapunzel twirls around in sheer exuberance while the camera circles her. A flock of birds, as though celebrating her happiness, circles Rapunzel and swoops upward, through a sunny break in the canopy of trees far overhead. They’re escaping the forest to explore the sky, taking us forward to Hiccup and Toothless. No doubt the shot was designed to exploit the thrilling effects of 3-D. But it works beautifully in 2-D as well.

“I can’t believe I did this!” Rapunzel exults repeatedly to herself. But then comes the cost of freedom, especially when it involves defying a beloved authority figure. “Mother would be so
furious.” In the hyper, contradictory manner of many adolescents, Rapunzel visits both ends of the emotional spectrum in rapid succession. In a montage of shots she alternately rejoices in her newfound freedom and damns herself for disobeying and betraying mother. Her wildly fluctuating moods may be amusing to us, but they’re logical for her character. Independence is seldom achieved in a single, uncomplicated bound. Perhaps if Rapunzel despised Mother Gothel, it would be. But she doesn’t yet realize how badly Gothel has treated her.

Flynn Rider, who never had a parent to either defy or regret defying, is not amused. He is visible in the background of many shots within Rapunzel’s montage, looking annoyed at Rapunzel’s emotional debate with herself. He simply cannot relate to her situation. She huddles in a dark cave, full of self-reproach, then kicks up a pile of leaves while proclaiming, “This is so much fun!” She despairs up in a tree, “I am a horrible daughter. I’m going back,” then rolls down a grassy hill, wrapped in her hair, exclaiming “I am never going back!” She lies face down in the grass, melodramatically damning herself as a “despicable human being,” then swings round and round a tree trunk, suspended by her amazing hair, announcing to the world, “Woo hoo! Best day ever!” Flynn leans against that same tree, motionless and mortified, never suspecting he will behave with similar contradiction when he discovers a better world and a better dream of his own, with the woman he currently finds so irritating.

But as he reluctantly observes, Flynn also schemes. Rapunzel pauses in her dilemma, temporarily frozen by mixed feelings of exhilaration and guilt, wrapped protectively in a cocoon of her own hair, as she was back in the tower when Mother Gothel frightened her with the lyrics of “Mother Knows Best.” Rider approaches, summarizing her situation as he sees it:

“Overprotective mother, forbidden road trip. This is serious stuff.” Is he sympathizing with her:
"A little rebellion, a little adventure, that’s good, healthy even.” It sounds like he’s trying to soothe away her regrets. But in truth he remains the con man, exploiting Rapunzel’s emotional dilemma for his own gain. He is not nearly ready to be generous to anyone else.

Pascal hops onto Flynn’s shoulder, scrutinizing him closely, suspecting something devious. For a moment he could even be a symbol of Rider’s repressed conscience. Flynn rudely brushes him off. After pretending to support Rapunzel’s bid for freedom, he suddenly reverses direction, slyly reinforcing her guilt about betraying mother, and magnanimously, or so he would have her believe, offering to cancel their bargain and return her to the tower. He’ll get back his satchel, she’ll get back a trusting mother/daughter relationship and they’ll part company as “unlikely friends.” But they are not friends yet, nor does he treat her like one. He merely wishes to avoid a hazardous trip back to the kingdom, and reclaim his stolen loot as soon as possible.

Returning the frying pan and pet lizard to Rapunzel, Flynn gently but firmly pulls her in the direction of the tower they left behind. Placing a reassuring arm around her shoulder is a nice touch. It’s part of another charm offensive, more subtle than his ineffective “smolder.” Rapunzel resists a little. But only after exchanging a look with her other self, Pascal, does she flat out reject Rider’s revised bargain. She reaffirms her determination to see the lanterns in person. Flynn loses patience, betraying his real, selfish motive. Rapunzel brandishes her old standby, the frying pan, in his face. He could easily avoid another clubbing and simply run away. But he would do so without his precious satchel, which, for the time being, is her only hold on him.

Something unseen stirs in the bushes nearby. It’s another false expectation. The dark myths Mother Gothel fed to Rapunzel about the world outside their tower reawaken in the girl’s mind. Freedom and the floating lanterns are momentarily forgotten as she latches onto her
untrustworthy guide, wrapping her arms and legs tightly around his neck and chest. She desperately needs his protection from the “thugs and ruffians” Mother Gothel warned her about in “Mother Knows Best” and no doubt on many previous occasions.

A harmless rabbit hops out of the bushes. Flynn, almost toppled by Rapunzel’s terrified grip, mocks her paranoia. “Stay calm. It can probably smell fear.” Embarrassed, she meekly apologizes and releases him. Again, he seems to sympathize. “Probably be best if we avoid ruffians and thugs though.” Embarrassed at her display of vulnerability, she agrees, now grateful for his superior knowledge of and guidance through this strange new world. Pascal, on the other hand, clearly suspects another devious gambit by Flynn Rider, and he’s right to do so. After a moment of contemplation, Flynn looks and sounds like a con artist again, offering to escort Rapunzel to a terrific place for lunch. She’s agrees to that plan, if enthusiastically. Now clearly the leader of this expedition, Flynn grabs her by the frying pan and pulls her in the direction of the destination he has in mind. Unfortunately, he does so not to satisfy her meager appetite, but instead to feed her lingering paranoia about the unknown. “You’ll know it when you smell it,” he promises, with devious double-meaning. The smell he has in mind has nothing to do with an appetizing meal.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, Maximus, one of Joseph Campbell’s “strangely intimate forces” who will both test and aid Rapunzel, sniffs for the villainous scent of Flynn Rider. He finds a “Wanted” poster with yet another inaccurate depiction of Rider’s nose: this one upturned and piggish. Max couldn’t care less. It’s Rider’s moral flaws that concern him. Frustrated, he pulls the poster off the tree trunk to which it was nailed and chews it to pieces. He would like to do the same to the man it depicts. Sniffing the ground for traces of Rider, his
quivering nostrils convey his fierce determination to enforce the letter of the law, regardless of
the complicated motivation behind Flynn’s violation of it. At this point in the story there is no
subtlety in Max’s point of view. And like Toothless, in the Dragon movies, his ears are
expressive of his thoughts and feelings. Whether alertly erect or aggressively flattened, they,
along with other physical features, speak volumes for a character who never speaks in a human
language. Pascal’s color changes do the same.

Moving low to the ground, Maximus seems part hunting dog and part prowling cat. Sensing
someone’s approach and hoping it’s Rider, he conceals himself behind a boulder and a tree
branch that when joined together look hilariously like Max himself. It’s difficult to disguise a
dream as fanatical as his. He pounces like a tiger from behind the boulder to surprise the
approaching stranger. But it’s not Flynn. It’s Mother Gothel, on her journey to fetch the
ingredients for Rapunzel’s paints. Though startled, she quickly recognizes the horse as belonging
to the King’s guard, minus its rider, who she mistakenly concludes is searching for the lost
Princess. In a panic she races back towards the tower. Puzzled, Maximus observes her odd
behavior with little interest, unaware that she is a much more “wanted” criminal than the one he
currently pursues. His obsession with Flynn blinds him to a greater opportunity. Rider merely
stole the Princess’s crown. Mother Gothel stole the Princess herself.

Noting the horse is missing its “rider,” Mother Gothel is ignorant of that word’s double
meaning. A very different Rider, despite being almost as selfish as Gothel at this point in the
story, is potentially a much greater threat to the old woman than is Max’s original rider. By the
end of the story, Flynn Rider, Maximus and a group of “thugs and ruffians” she repeatedly
warned Rapunzel about will bring about the death of Gothel’s selfish dream.
Mother Gothel’s fear is palpable as she returns to the tower in search of Rapunzel. When she calls up to her daughter and gets no response, she gains entry through a hidden passage known only to herself—a hedge against Rapunzel ever refusing to let her into the tower via the teenager’s golden hair. Inside the tower she finds no one. What she does find is the not so well hidden satchel containing the stolen crown and a copy of the “Wanted” poster Flynn vainly kept during his flight from Maximus and the King’s soldiers. Had he not stuffed it into his satchel, Mother Gothel would have no idea who left the tower with Rapunzel. Knowing it was a wanted thief and not a member of the royal guard who absconded with her daughter gives Mother Gothel hope that Rapunzel is not well protected. Pursuing the pair, she takes along a knife, making clear her intentions for Flynn. But if in her cynicism she imagines Flynn Rider is and always will be as criminally selfish as herself, she’s in for an unpleasant surprise. The inaccurate depiction of Flynn’s nose on the poster Mother Gothel finds in the satchel is indicative of her mistaken notion of his future intentions towards Rapunzel. He will prove a man of many faces.

Mother Gothel’s reaction to Rapunzel’s crown is interesting. Upon finding it, she flings it away in panic, knowing that Rapunzel is intended to rule the kingdom her parents bequeathed to her. To be reminded of that fact terrifies the old woman who would, in order to remain perpetually young and alive, keep Rapunzel a child forever. The crown is for Mother Gothel a dreaded symbol of Rapunzel’s independence, and therefore of her own mortality.

Flynn and Rapunzel arrive at their destination, a picturesque inn called the Snuggly Duckling. “Perfect for you,” he falsely describes the place. “Don’t want you scaring and giving up on the whole endeavor now, do we,” he reassures her. Substitute “I” for “Don’t” and you have the truth. Nervous, still clutching the frying pan (her security blanket) in her hands, Rapunzel nevertheless
takes him at his word. “I do love ducklings.” Possibly because of the duckling that hung over her crib nearly eighteen years ago. She glances hopefully at her guide, who responds with an enthusiastic “Yea!” that both encourages and mocks her naïve trust in him. He treats her like a child, presuming incorrectly that he is in complete control of the overall situation. It’s a perfect set-up for another reversal of fortune and another blow to his arrogance.

The Snuggly Duckling is a rather picturesque setting, except for the giant tree growing out of its base, heaving the building partly onto its side and giving it an unbalanced appearance. Tree branches grow within the structure as well, like primitive intrusions of Nature on civilization. It’s a nifty symbol of the evil inclinations and warped attitudes our heroine and hero will encounter there. Mother Gothel did not entirely lie about the bad things Rapunzel would encounter outside the womb-like security of her tower. She did, however, exaggerate them, withholding information about the potential rewards Rapunzel might also discover there. The Snuggly Duckling scene is all about facing the unpleasant and ferreting out the hidden treasure within it.

Flynn throws open the door to the Inn, exposing Rapunzel to the full shock of what he knows awaits her inside: as motley a crew of “ruffians and thugs” as she could ever imagine. They are beefy, misshapen, barbaric looking men, including one with a wicked metal hook in place of a hand. Some of them would not look out of place in the rough and tumble Viking village of Berk, in How to Train Your Dragon. Rapunzel reflexively brandishes the frying pan in front of her. Flynn gleefully encourages her to take in the “bad man smell,” then the “really bad man smell,” of the place. That is what he meant when he told her earlier, “You’ll know it when you smell it.” The smell, he tells her, reminds him of the color brown. The analogy is not difficult to guess. Before the end of their long journey together he will change his tune about the color brown, and
about a lot of other things as well. But for the time being he promotes her fear of the inn’s patrons while referring to her as “Goldie.” Like “Blondie,” it’s another disrespectful nickname intended to keep her at an emotional distance.

One of the thugs, Blood in the Mustache, admires Rapunzel’s long blonde hair as he creepily runs it through his fingers. Luckily he knows nothing about its magical qualities. Describing the Snuggly Duckling as a “five star joint,” Flynn takes advantage of Rapunzel’s inexperience to portray the worst the world has to offer as the best. Mother Gothel did the same, and worse, for equally bad reasons. But in Rider’s defense, he might not be quite so eager to return Rapunzel to the tower if he knew the truth about her life there.

For the second time, Rider tries to lead Rapunzel back towards the tower. But this time he’s outsmarted himself. Thanks to another false-faced, pride-wounding “Wanted” poster hanging on the inside of the door towards which Flynn nudges Rapunzel, the inn’s patrons know all about his criminal history and the reward offered for his arrest. Sending one of their gang to fetch the authorities, they restrain the no longer so cocky young man, pulling him in multiple directions as each selfishly tries to claim the reward for himself. As it was between Flynn and the Stabbington Brothers, there is little honor among these thieves. “Gentlemen, please!” Flynn pleads to the wrong audience. Not a gentleman in the place, or so it seems. Who’s being naïve now? Their dreams of avarice collide with his, and he loses.

Desperate to fulfill her own dream, Rapunzel overcomes her fear and rescues Flynn from being pummeled now and arrested later. It’s not quite an act of compassionate self-sacrifice, but it’s better than anything Flynn has done for her. Curiously, she employs a branch of the warped tree that has invaded the inn to violently assert her will. She is no more immune to violent impulses
than are the inn’s patrons. Unfortunately neither Rapunzel’s courage, her rope-like hair nor the
tree limb she uses for a club are sufficient to dissuade Hook Hand and the others. Something
very different about her touches this mob of cutthroats. Explaining to them that she needs Flynn
to reach her dream of seeing the floating lanterns, she pleads, “Find your humanity! Haven’t any
of you ever had a dream?” Brandishing a huge battleaxe, Hook Hand approaches Rapunzel as if
to split her in half. She is terrified again, with good reason. Hook Hand is no bunny rabbit. He’s
a genuine “thug.” But he’s harbors a snuggly duckling inside of him.

Instead of killing the young woman, Hook Hand admits to her, “I had a dream once.” At first
glance, he and the other ruffians seemed to be like Mother Gothel and the Stabbington Brothers--
adults entrenched in their cynicism, greed and cruelty, beyond any hope of change for the better.
Fortunately for Flynn and Rapunzel, something better still beats in their grubby little hearts.
Something Rapunzel unwittingly awakens by being herself rather than trying to be what she fears
they are. This is one of those unlikely but not quite impossible moments of near-magic that keeps
hope alive for the “happily ever after” ending that could so easily be extinguished right now. The
comic abruptness of Hook Hand’s change of attitude sharpens our awareness of the absurdity of
the heroine and hero’s good fortune. It’s like a glorious non-sequitur from a classic Marx
Brothers routine. But life contains such absurdities, at least on rare occasions.

“I’ve Got a Dream” begins as Hook Hand’s solo about his long-suppressed dream of being a
concert pianist, then becomes a communal medley of the secret dreams of other denizens of this
foul-smelling hellhole. Crudity and cuddliness, violence and sentiment mix in equal, wildly
amusing proportions. The contradictions of human nature are on full display. Hook Hand starts
the ball rolling by tossing his axe at and nearly decapitating a scrawny minstrel seated in the
corner. Nothing personal, it's just his way of signaling for music. And he gets it.

The honky-tonk piano accompaniment in this song sounds like something out of an Old West saloon. "Grotesquely optimistic" nicely describes the bizarre lyrics and raucously upbeat music. "Though I do like breakin' femurs, you can count me with the dreamers," claims Hook Hand the beast and the dreamer. His piano, a kind of civilized wood, is bracketed by primitive tree branches. He's found his "humanity," as Rapunzel requested. She became his guide to a better existence.

Romance, flower arranging, sewing, mime, puppetry, interior design, baking and collecting ceramic unicorns illustrate the softer side of the thugs and ruffians, though each with a freakish twist. Big Nose hands Rapunzel a flower while singing of his desire to make a "love connection." She is not within his romantic reach. Tor, an aspiring florist, assembles a bouquet out of skulls, lilies and a live rat. Killer practices his stitching technique on an ugly cut in Bruiser's bicep. Weird, head-bobbing, beer-barrel-tossing choreography accompanies a very catchy tune in what passes for optimistic exuberance among these rough-edged characters.

Rapunzel enthusiastically participates in the absurd yet warm-hearted medley. The monsters of her Gothel-fed nightmares cheer her on as she adds her dream to theirs. Pascal, speaking on this occasion for the less trusting side of Rapunzel's personality, remains extremely wary of two head-bobbing rats who join in the celebration. Flynn Rider hangs on a coat hook where one of the thugs stashed him, out of the way, looking as grumpy as he did when Rapunzel sang about her joy of freedom outside the tower. Emotionally speaking, Hook Hand and his fellow ruffians are more mature than is the hero. Not inclined to share his dream with anyone, Flynn is roughly persuaded to do so by Rapunzel's new friends. Threatened by a forest of knives and swords
pointed at his throat, he contributes one verse of song and dance to the group production.

"I have dreams like you. No, really! Just much less touchy-feely. They mainly happen somewhere warm and sunny. On an island that I own, tanned and rested and alone, surrounded by enormous piles of money." And there you have a succinct description of his private dream: material wealth, physical comfort and emotional isolation. The basic trust he never learned as a parentless child has been replaced by a twisted, narcissistic fantasy. Money, possessions and emotional invulnerability (not to be confused with the kind of independence Rapunzel seeks) have become his parents. And if he doesn’t find a new dream to replace this one, he will never outgrow them. He will, instead, become the like the entrenched Stabbington Brothers.

The "alone" part of Rider’s dream is what Rapunzel has experienced for the past eighteen years. She could tell him a thing or two about the hollowness of that wish. But so far he knows nothing about her life in the tower. Illustrating his dream, the way Rapunzel did hers by painting images on the walls of her tower, Flynn borrows one of Vladimir’s little ceramic unicorns. The unicorn is a mythical, one-of-a-kind creature neatly representing Flynn’s mythical image of himself. It’s an impossibly rosy self-portrait of invulnerability through detachment. But the thugs and ruffians with whom he tried to frighten Rapunzel repeatedly drag him back into a communal celebration with which he does not sympathize. He remains an outsider in this scene. Contrast it with the upcoming village dance, in which he starts out a spectator and, albeit reluctantly at first, becomes an enthusiastic participant.

During one brief moment of respite, an exhausted Flynn is confronted by a contented, cud-chewing goat. In another sense, Flynn is the goat in this scene. Mocked on all sides by a prevailing mood solidarity and empathy in which he refuses to participate, except when forced
to do so, he remains fundamentally a loner. Not unlike Mother Gothel, who as far we ever see has no friends and desires none.

“I’ve Got a Dream” concludes with a rousing group affirmation of “Yeah!” as the creatures of Rapunzel’s former nightmares hoist her onto a table and salute her with raised mugs of ale, or whatever foul brew they’re drinking. A little old drunkard named Shorty, crazily dressed up like Cupid with wings, drops into Rapunzel’s arms. He’s another subconscious flashback to a figure that once hovered over her crib, and possibly an amusing peek at her own future as a mother—a future in which Flynn Rider, at present, wants no part. But I’m getting ahead of the story. The point of the Snuggly Duckling scene is that the big bad wolf is not always what he seems to be. Unfortunately, Mother Gothel has caught up to her runaway daughter. She spies on Rapunzel and her new friends from a window. And the thug who was earlier sent to fetch the King’s soldiers returns with them, not realizing that during his absence his cohorts underwent an attitude reversal, thanks to Rapunzel.

Flynn, the arrogant thief who moments ago needed to be rescued by the young woman he tried to bamboozle, suddenly reappears to rescue her. This movie is full of reversals. Of course, she is Flynn’s key to regaining the satchel—the fulfillment of his dream. So it’s not an entirely noble act. Pulling her off stage (the table top where she finished the song), he hides with her under the bar. Quick thinking on his part, but he sees no avenue of escape as the guards, with the shackled Stabbington Brothers in tow, invade the inn and search for him.

Fortunately the hero and heroine have powerful new allies, thanks to the girl Flynn tried to ditch. Hook Hand silently directs them to a hidden tunnel behind the bar. “Go. Live your dream,” he encourages them. “I will,” replies Rider, thinking only of himself and ignoring Rapunzel’s
dream, as usual. Hilariously blunt, Hook Hand tells Flynn what Flynn should have figured out for himself by now. “Your dream stinks. I was talkin’ to her,” referring to Rapunzel, the new leading lady of the Snuggly Duckling stage, who rewards Hook Hand with a kiss on the cheek. Her initial opinion of the inn, based solely on its name, was right after all. But it was a close call. Things could have turned out very differently if she hadn’t struck the right chord to awaken the humanity in a group of villains who have obviously done some very nasty things. Fairy tales are usually about dreams coming true, not dying in mid-story.

Scowling at Hook Hand’s insult, because he isn’t ready to question the value of his long-held dream, Flynn leads Rapunzel into the tunnel. Other ruffians distract and mislead the guards, who are not overly bright. But Maximus is not so easily fooled. Sniffing out the secret tunnel, he uses his hoof to push the lever that reveals it to his human compatriots. Disgust at their incompetence is written all over his face. Yet his competence is rather scary, because it is without compassion.

Somehow, by fairy tale reckoning, making a large white horse rather than an ordinary human the epitome of moral certitude and righteous indignation makes that role more memorable. Without the future influence of Rapunzel, Maximus could easily become the fanatical, hyper-moral, bloodthirsty Snowball or the ruthless Napoleon, two young boars in George Orwell’s fairy tale nightmare, Animal Farm. In historical terms, Max is Tangled’s version of Robespierre, the embodiment of conscience gone mad during the French Revolution.

Meaner than the reformed Snuggly Duckling thugs, the Stabbington Brothers easily overwhelm one frightened soldier left behind to guard them, and begin their own pursuit of Flynn Rider. Revenge and greed sum up their dream. Their appearance in this scene reminds us that the world really does contain much worse evil than what our heroine conquered in the Snuggly Duckling.
Equally single-minded and ruthless is Mother Gothel, who encounters Shorty outside the inn. The poor drunk thinks he’s found his dream. He flatters her shamelessly. She laps it up, enjoying the side-benefits of her illicitly acquired youth and beauty. But only for a moment. With the same sadistic glee she displayed in her dealings with Rapunzel, she turns on her unlikely suitor, poking his nose with the tip of her sharp knife and demanding to know where the secret tunnel leads. Addicted to the qualities Shorty complimented, she has no interest in romance. The only thing she cares about is guaranteeing her perpetual access to Rapunzel’s magic.

The dark tunnel contains evidence of past violence, including a skeleton pinned to the wall by a sword through its ribs. Since this tunnel was used by the thugs and ruffians of the Snuggly Duckling, it’s pretty clear the heroine and hero were fortunate to survive their visit to the inn unscathed. Rapunzel’s appeal to the ruffians’ gentler side was the critical factor in that survival. The inn and its criminal patrons were a heroic test that she passed.

Flynn, leading the way with a lantern, grudgingly admits to being impressed by the way Rapunzel handled herself at the inn. He understates the matter. She saved his butt. “I know!” Rapunzel gushes, surprised at her own exhibition of courage, yet still clinging to her frying pan. She tries to appear nonchalant and not surprised by tucking the pan behind her back, in order to impress Rider. For a moment she succeeds. He flashes her a brief smile. His barricaded heart is beginning to yield. Encouraged, Rapunzel flirts with him, brushing back her hair and getting personal. “Sooo, Flynn. Where are you from?” But it’s too much too soon for Flynn. “Whoa! Whoa! Sorry, Blondie.” Again he keeps her at arm’s length with that disrespectful nickname. “I don’t do back story.” Nor will he refer to her buddy, Pascal, as a chameleon, referring to him instead as a frog and vaguely questioning the nature of their relationship, which may be the
filmmakers' wry comment on the prevalence of animal lovers in fairy tales like “The Frog Prince” and “Beauty and the Beast.” Pascal’s vaguely defined fantasy role in Rapunzel’s life will eventually be replaced in more realistic terms by Flynn himself, after he earns her trust and affection.

But if Flynn won’t yet share his past with Rapunzel, he expects her to do so. Forbidden to inquire about her magical hair and mysterious mother, undoubtedly because she doesn’t trust him with such potentially dangerous information, he asks instead why she hasn’t travelled to see the floating lanterns before now. It’s a question with no obvious link to his desire to retrieve the satchel. Until this moment, everything he’s said to her was geared towards recovering the stolen crown. For the first time he’s more interested in Rapunzel than in faking an interest in order to recover the promise of his own shabby dream. It’s a glimmer of emotional maturity. Rapunzel hesitates before answering, not wanting to make herself vulnerable, as he didn’t when he declined to answer her question about where he’s from. Their separate, contrary dreams are slowly transforming into something shared. But before they can break down any more barriers, their conversation is disrupted by Maximus and the King’s soldiers in hot pursuit.

Fleeing the King’s posse, Rapunzel and Flynn emerge from the tunnel only to find themselves on a dead end precipice overlooking a deep ravine: part of a massive construction project consisting of a dam, a waterwheel and an incomplete aqueduct. It’s the setting for another of Joseph Campbell’s tests. A rickety ladder leading from the precipice to the ground far below offers the possibility of escape, until the Stabbington Brothers emerge from a different branch of the Snuggly Duckling tunnel at ground level. Not surprisingly, Flynn has enemies everywhere. He’s trapped between vengeful criminals and relentless law enforcers, or id and superego if you
prefer such terms. Rapunzel employs her long hair to swing herself onto another precipice a safe
distance away. Has she deserted Rider?

Facing the soldiers alone, Flynn employs the only weapon at his command. To his surprise and
delight he is able to knock out three of his pursuers with Rapunzel’s frying pan. His reluctant
acquaintance with the girl yields unexpected benefits. But in a duel with Max, the ultimate
policeman who wields a sword better than did any of his human colleagues, he meets his match.
Stripped of his frying pan, the tip of Max’s sword pointing at his neck, Flynn jokes in the face of
doom. That’s part of his charm, but also an emotional defense against a dangerous world, as it
will be for Hiccup in *How to Train Your Dragon*.

Rapunzel comes to his rescue again, lassoing Flynn’s right hand with her hair and pulling him
off the ledge to safety. Taking the plunge with his usual flair, he taunts Maximus with a goodbye
wave. For the first time hero and heroine perform as a well-oiled team, taking turns rescuing
each other from peril. Rapunzel had no intention of deserting Flynn, or of giving up her dream
by doing so.

Swinging down into the ravine, Flynn finds himself out of the frying pan but heading for the
fire. The Stabbington Brothers await him at the bottom, ready to slice him to ribbons with their
swords. Yanking on her hair, Rapunzel raises the arc of Flynn’s swing just enough for him to
evade their sharp blades. He glances back at his furious former partners. “You look ridiculous!”
he arrogantly taunts them. Did he learn nothing from the unexpected clubbing he took in the
tower and the rescue he desperately needed at the Snuggly Duckling, both courtesy of Rapunzel?
Slamming gut-first into a protrusion sticking out from the side of the cliff, he now looks
painfully “ridiculous.” He’s clever, physically adroit, witty and charming. But he’s neither
all-knowing nor invincible, as he occasionally likes to flatter himself. It's a need fuelled by emotional insecurities he's had since childhood.

Equally clever, resourceful and overconfident, Maximus uses his powerful back legs to kick loose a wooden support beam from the dam, creating a bridge between his ledge and Rapunzel's. He starts to cross it, with his head and neck aggressively lowered. He may represent conscience and moral judgment, but he brings an animalistic power to his crusade that sometimes puts him on a par with the hulking, brutal Stabbington Brothers. And his fierce determination to punish wrong-doers is sometimes self-defeating, as evidenced by the catastrophic consequences of his powerful kick. Like his attempt to stomp Flynn off the tree branch on which they fought to possess the stolen crown, his pursuit of Rapunzel, because she helped a wanted criminal, endangers everyone. And he doesn't even realize the woman he now threatens is worth more to the King and Queen than a thousand crowns like the one Rider stole.

Now it's Flynn's turn to rescue Rapunzel, using her hair as a fulcrum to swing her down to ground level. He still refers to her as "Blondie," but with less contempt in his voice. Without hesitating, as she did before descending the tower, Rapunzel takes a leap of faith (in Flynn), jumping with Pascal in tow and barely avoiding Max's snapping jaws. How "ridiculous" the horse would feel if he knew he was snapping at the Lost Princess. She glides to a smooth stop in the ravine. The Stabbington Brothers immediately give chase. Daredevil Flynn, living the type of fantasy he's dreamt about since childhood (but we're not supposed to know that yet), deftly rides the collapsing aqueduct all the way down to ground level, then smartly gathers up Rapunzel's trailing hair to keep it out of their pursuers' grasp. The same hair that was essential to the survival of both hero and heroine moments ago is now a handicap. It always has that
double-edged quality.

Like Flynn, his opposite in other respects, Maximus sometimes outsmarts himself. The support beam he kicked away from the dam in order to create a pathway to Rapunzel, whom he regards as nothing more than an accessory to theft, triggers an ever-growing leak. Soon the dam breaks and a wall of water cascades into the ravine, sweeping away Max and the King’s soldiers while trapping Rapunzel and Flynn in yet another tunnel into which they flee for safety. As an unintended result of Max’s effort, Flynn Rider might yet feel the lethal hand of justice. After all, his “Wanted” posters do read “Dead or Alive.” But in his obsession to punish Rider, Max doesn’t realize his actions also endanger the Lost Princess, whose safe return to her parents and the kingdom would be far more significant than bringing a thief to justice and returning the Princess’s crown to its shrine.

Water pours into the tunnel, rising higher and higher. Rapunzel and Flynn struggle mightily to save themselves and each other. While Flynn repeatedly plunges into the dark water to search for an escape route, Rapunzel hammers away at the rock ceiling with her frying pan, hoping to break through. She is no passive damsel in distress, waiting for the hero to do it all. Unsuccessful, Flynn returns to their diminishing air pocket. Rapunzel dives into the water to try where he failed, but Flynn pulls her back to him, telling her it’s too dark to see anything down there. He cuts his hand trying to break through the impenetrable rock above them. Both characters give it their best effort. The girl who felt she had to blackmail her reluctant guide, and the young man who wanted to be rid of her as soon as possible, no longer exist.

Drowning appears imminent. Crying, Rapunzel apologizes to Flynn for getting him into such a mess. “This is all my fault. She [Mother Gothel] was right. I never should have done this. I’m so
sorry, Flynn." In what she believes to be her final moments of life, Rapunzel’s greatest concern is for Flynn, not for herself. He is visibly stunned and touched by her compassion--so much so that in what he’s certain are his final moments he revokes his rule against sharing personal information. He reveals to Rapunzel that his real name is Eugene Fitzherbert, not Flynn Rider. By removing one of his masks, figuratively speaking, he makes himself a little more vulnerable to her. He is no longer just a phony, manufactured image. “Someone might as well know,” he adds, suggesting that until now no one else ever gave a damn about him, or his real name. More importantly, he seems to regret that painful fact. Previously he would never have admitted such regret, perhaps even to himself.

Rapunzel’s feelings of guilt over endangering Flynn’s life in pursuit of her private dream leads her to, for the moment, regret disobeying Mother Gothel and leaving the tower. This is the second time since escaping the tower that she’s had second thoughts about doing so, and it won’t be the last. The contest between her desire for freedom and independence and her regressive desire to be dependent on and protected (from her own mistakes, among other things) by a superior, parental authority is seldom a smooth ride. Hiccup the teenage Viking will experience similar episodes of self-doubt and regret during his difficult journey to adulthood.

Fairy tales both defy and deal in reality. The story of Rapunzel and Eugene could logically end with their deaths by drowning. The potential for tragedy in this scene is potently conveyed. The characters’ arbitrary, magical escape from their desperate situation enhances that whiff of tragedy by, paradoxically, satisfying our desire for them to avoid it. Plot developments serve the heroine and hero’s journey of discovery instead of the other way around.

One good turn deserves another. Inspired by Eugene’s confession, which was in turn inspired
by her compassion, Rapunzel tells him about her magical hair, which glows when she sings. A short time ago she refused to discuss her hair with Flynn, because she didn’t trust him. Now she does, as he does her. By fairy tale logic, that mutual trust generates benefits for both. Just in the nick of time, Rapunzel’s hair illuminates the flooded tunnel. Flabbergasted, Flynn involuntarily expels some of the precious air in his lungs. Noticing her hair being sucked towards a pile of rocks through which water is obviously draining out, he and Rapunzel perform as a team to tear open an escape route. Successful, they plunge headlong out of the tunnel and into a stream outside.

Rapunzel and Eugene pushing and clawing their way out of the tunnel and then being expelled, along with a gush of water, into a stream outside is imagery very suggestive of birth. Their close encounter with death inside both tunnels, and their determined teamwork to save each other, inspired both characters to become more trusting and honest. By revealing his real name to Rapunzel, Flynn Rider is in effect re-born as the more emotionally open Eugene Fitzherbert. By revealing one of the magical powers of her golden hair, Rapunzel takes a major step towards conquering her childish terror of the outside world and everyone in it. And she probably wouldn’t have thought of telling Flynn about her hair if he hadn’t opened up first about his name. Their relationship fundamentally changes during their time together in “the Belly of the Whale,” as Joseph Campbell might describe the perilous tunnels in *Tangled (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 74).*

Downstream the three survivors emerge from the water and collapse on shore, exhausted. Eugene is still preoccupied with the shock of learning about Rapunzel’s magical hair. Rapunzel, having grown up with it, reacts in a more practical manner. “We’re alive!” she exults, and gets
on with living. She has another surprise for “Eugene,” as she refers to him from now on. Her hair “doesn’t just glow” hints of more magic to come. Flynn Rider once thought he knew everything. Yet an eighteen year old girl who’s led a truly sheltered life thoroughly baffles him. Pascal, anticipating Rapunzel’s next magic act, grins at Rider. As Rapunzel’s alter-ego, the little chameleon is proud of her ability to surprise and impress her much more experienced guide. In *How to Train Your Dragon*, Hiccup reacts similarly when he gets the chance to surprise and impress a girl who previously took little notice of him.

The situation is very different at an alternate exit from the Snuggly Duckling tunnel, concealed in the hollow trunk of a tree. Like the tunnel exit forged by Rapunzel and Eugene, the opening in the tree visually resembles a place of birth. Rapunzel undergoes a kind of rebirth from dependent child to independent woman. Mother Gothel, selfishly determined to prevent that transformation, hides near the opening in the tree trunk, ready to stab Flynn Rider as soon as he emerges. To her, Flynn is an agent of Rapunzel’s liberation and must be eliminated in order for her to force the girl back into a state of childhood. She is surprised to see instead two strangers emerge from the hole in the tree trunk: strangers who are incapable of changing for the better and whose emergence therefore mocks the very idea of a re-birth to a better state of existence.

The Stabbington Brothers are as selfish and small-minded now as when they entered the tunnel at the Snuggly Duckling. Yet their greed proves useful to the enchantress, who is far more devious than either of them. One of the Brothers vows to kill Flynn Rider. Mother Gothel improvises a new plan of action based partly on that revealing comment. She casually returns the stolen crown to the thieves, who briefly battle one another to possess it. They are “brothers” in name only. If they had cheated Flynn out of the crown instead of him cheating them, they would
probably have fought over it themselves.

Mother Gothel slyly dangles before the single-minded twins the possibility of a prize far more valuable than the stolen crown. As an additional enticement, she throws in a chance for revenge against Flynn Rider. They might be ruthless and strong, but like the King’s soldiers they are not very bright. Mother Gothel bamboozles them with the same ease that Flynn Rider once did. Yet both Flynn and Gothel meet their match in Rapunzel.

Sitting on a log beside a warm campfire in the forest, Rapunzel wraps Eugene’s injured hand with her golden hair, apologizing for causing him pain while doing so. He is puzzled and curious, describing her demeanor as “strangely cryptic.” His tone of voice is soft and sincere. He no longer sounds like a con man working an angle. Telling Eugene not to “freak out,” Rapunzel sings her healing song. Her hair glows from root to tip. Eugene stares wide-eyed as the glow travels to and envelops his hand. When her song concludes, he unwraps his hand and finds it completely healed. There is no smugness in him as he opens his mouth to scream in astonishment. Rapunzel repeats her request for him not to freak out. With considerable effort, he complies. He now feels comfortable enough with Rapunzel to accede to her requests if he can—something he did only under protest at the beginning of their acquaintance.

Eugene, as he soon reveals, grew up an orphan. Rapunzel was deprived of her real parents and raised by a cold-hearted, manipulative surrogate. As they travel together and learn to trust each other, they adopt the roles of the kind, loving, devoted parents they should have had. Under the best of circumstances we learn such behavior from our parents and in turn bestow it on our friends, lovers and children. Rapunzel healing Eugene’s hand, despite its magical, fairy tale quality, is no different than a mother soothing away the pain of her child’s scrape or scratch.
Eugene will eventually return that favor, playing kindly father to Rapunzel. These quiet exchanges of compassion complement the more spectacular, action-oriented scenes in which the two characters physically rescue each other from mortal danger. Rapunzel’s expression of maternal compassion on this occasion is rendered especially cozy and touching by the campfire and the darkness surrounding it. This scene gives us and the characters a better idea of how they will treat each other in the future, when they spend lots of time alone together, without an external threat to trigger their protective instincts.

By healing Eugene’s injured hand with her magical hair, Rapunzel takes yet another risk in violation of Mother Gothel’s warning about strangers. Her instinct to help Eugene outweighs her fear of being exploited by him. Violating her back story rule again, she reveals that once cut, her hair turns brown and loses its special power. She shows Eugene a sample of such damage, which according to Mother Gothel was done by an evil stranger when Rapunzel was an infant. What she doesn’t know is that Mother Gothel herself cut the hair. What Rapunzel cannot know is that by trusting Eugene with this piece of information now, she provides him with the means to save her from permanent enslavement to Mother Gothel later in the story.

Rapunzel adds, “A gift like that has to be protected. That’s why I never left the …” She pauses, ashamed to admit the truth about her sheltered life. Eugene compassionately finishes the line for her. “You never left that tower.” They’re now speaking friend to friend. “And you’re still gonna go back?” he asks her, his tone of voice implying that she shouldn’t, which is in direct contradiction to the old Flynn’s dream of recovering the stolen crown he assumes is still in that tower. Rapunzel, resting her head in her hands, replies indecisively. This is a conversation they could not have had when they first met. Their shared experiences since then have forged an
intimacy between them that makes it possible now.

Rapunzel sighs with relief. Her disclosures to Eugene have been therapeutic for her. She brushes back her long hair and presses it against her neck with her hands, giving us and Eugene a visual preview of Rapunzel with short hair, foreshadowing her liberation yet to come. She and Eugene, without consciously realizing it, are building the foundation of each other’s liberation in this scene.

Turning the tables on Eugene, Rapunzel coyly solicits more details about his back story. He balks at first, as he did in the first tunnel. “I’ll spare you the story of poor orphan Eugene Fitzherbert. It’s a little bit of a downer.” Which means it’s painful for him to remember, as it was for Rapunzel to talk about her years of isolation in the tower. Yet he violates his own rule by revealing two significant details about his past, “poor” and “orphan,” even as he claims he won’t. Rapunzel sidles closer to him, fixes him with her big green eyes and rests her chin on her hands, signaling her strong interest. “Tell me your story” her posture says. He can no longer resist her. Nor does he want to.

As an orphaned child, Eugene read adventure books to the younger children. That alone is surprisingly responsible, adult-like behavior from someone who would later fancy himself a thoroughly irresponsible rogue. One of the books he read aloud was about a character named Flynnigan Rider, “swashbuckling rogue, richest man alive, not bad with the ladies either. Not that he’d ever brag about it, of course.” The sources of Eugene’s insecurities and overcompensations become a little clearer. Rapunzel inquires if the fictional Flynn too was a thief. Eugene, now somewhat embarrassed by his criminal behavior, explains that his literary counterpart could afford to buy anything he wanted, without resorting to robbery. Flashback to
“surrounded by enormous piles of money” and Flynn’s shabby dream, as expressed in song at the Snuggly Duckling.

The fact that young Eugene Fitzherbert drew the wrong lesson from an adventure book is a little warning embedded within the larger adventure of Tangled. No story can produce benefits for its audience without the active cooperation of that audience. As Alex so enthusiastically demonstrates in A Clockwork Orange (1971), any work of art can be perverted into something ugly. On the other hand, young orphan Eugene obviously needed some form of escape from his powerless, loveless childhood. The tales of Flynnagan Rider provided that escape, even though Eugene’s interpretation of them turned out to be a trap.

Not quite liberated from his original dream yet, Eugene asks Rapunzel not to reveal the details of his life story, or his phony name, to anyone else. “It could ruin my whole reputation.” Image matters. She mocks his request. “Ahhh, we wouldn’t want that.” Her mockery recalls his mockery of her when she revealed her fondness for ducklings just before they entered the Snuggly Duckling Inn. But back then Flynn relished the thought of shocking her into cancelling their bargain, returning her to the tower and regaining his satchel. Rapunzel’s mockery is more kindly meant, and Eugene knows it. “Well, a fake reputation is all a man has,” he jokes back, with humor matching hers. Together they laugh at his foolishness. That’s what friends and lovers can do for each other. They could not have shared such a moment earlier.

From Eugene’s point of view, Rapunzel stares at him with unselfconscious affection. He feels the urge to respond in kind, then, not yet ready to return that affection, self-consciously stops himself, inventing an excuse to leave her for awhile. He must retrieve more wood for the fire. As he walks away, Rapunzel soothes the awkwardness he feels about their newfound intimacy by
telling him she prefers Eugene Fitzherbert to Flynn Rider. She’s trying to make it easier for him to be that new Eugene instead of the old Flynn. “Well, then you’d be the first. But thank you,” he replies. There’s a touch of sadness in his admission. Prior to Rapunzel, we can assume no one encouraged him to be the best he could be, instead of the manipulative, greedy, dishonest, distrusting if charming jerk he became. He’s grateful to her, rubbing his healed hand as he departs, remembering the other kindness she did for him.

Rapunzel fondly watches Eugene depart. It’s a big moment in the movie, signaling a major improvement in their previously troubled relationship. Then the camera pans to her right, revealing Mother Gothel standing behind her. “Well, I thought he’d never leave,” declares the old woman with her usual sarcasm. Unlike heroine and hero, Gothel never changes, and seems incapable of doing so. Playing the martyr for the umpteenth time in order to make Rapunzel feel like a naughty child, while pretending to show affection with a hug, she explains how she found her daughter. “I just listened to the sound of complete and utter betrayal and followed that.” For Mother Gothel, everything revolves around herself. Anyone who fails to accommodate her wishes has obviously betrayed her.

Gothel’s martyr act is wearing thin with Rapunzel, who resists her parent’s command to return home. She tries to explain how much she’s learned during her incredible journey outside the tower. Imagine a freshman at college enthusiastically explaining to her parents the new friends she’s made and the new experiences she’s had during her first week away from home. They should be excited for her. Mother Gothel isn’t. Best of all, Rapunzel proclaims, she’s met someone. “Yes, a wanted thief. I’m so proud,” Gothel mocks her. That would be a very funny line for a parent dealing with an unreasonable teenager who exhibits poor judgment in how she
chooses her friends and lovers. But Gothel is a kidnapper (the worst kind of thief) and a liar. Her criticism is pure hypocrisy. Of course Rapunzel doesn’t realize she was kidnapped, so she can’t retaliate for that hypocrisy. Still, she resists when Mother Gothel tries to drag her away from the glowing campfire she shares with Eugene and towards the fog and darkness symbolic of the prison to which her phony mother would return her.

“I think he likes me,” Rapunzel adds, referring to Eugene. In fact, he does like her, and with good reason. Mother Gothel counters with two arguments. The first belittles Rapunzel as unworthy of any man’s romantic interest. “That’s demented” could be another verse from “Mother Knows Best,” in which she described her daughter as grubby, chubby, vague and a ditz.

Rapunzel answers with a firm “No!” Failing in her attempt to make the girl doubt herself, Mother Gothel switches her aim to Eugene. Handing Flynn’s satchel to Rapunzel, she suggests her daughter in turn give it to the thief and see how quickly he dumps her. The old woman trusts no man, and never will. What happened in her past to make her so cynical? With a frightening, angry grimace, she sings “Mother knows best!” and departs with a flourish. It’s the only song she sings—the only song she knows. A thick haze rises during her performance. Figuratively speaking, it’s the fog of confusion in which Mother Gothel tries to engulf Rapunzel yet again. Deceiving her daughter is something she’s long practiced in order to retain control of Rapunzel’s magic hair. Yet she seems sincere in her belief that Flynn Rider is incapable of behaving any differently than would she herself. Apparently there is no Eugene Fitzherbert hiding within her, waiting for the right encouragement to emerge.

Satchel in hand, Rapunzel is left alone with a hint of revived doubt. When she hears Eugene returning with more firewood, she quickly hides the satchel, not ready to risk a test of his
newfound affection and integrity. And he does his cause no good by inquiring if Rapunzel’s magic hair will give him superhuman strength in the hand it healed. “I’m not gonna lie, that would be stupendous.” Is he merely joking, or is he half-serious? Does the lingering thief in him hope to exploit Rapunzel’s power for illicit gain?

Seeing Rapunzel in a pensive posture, Eugene changes his tone of voice and gently inquires if she’s okay. She assures him she is, but still doesn’t reveal the satchel. Feeding wood to the fire, Eugene resumes his flippant manner of speech, very different from the serious tone of their previous conversation. “Superhuman good looks? I’ve always had ‘em. Born with it. But superhuman strength? Imagine the possibilities?” Do they include the possibility of pulling off more robberies without fear of capture? For a moment he sounds more like the old Flynn than the new Eugene. With a worried expression on her face, Rapunzel glances back in the direction of Mother Gothel’s departure, perhaps wondering if Mother really does know best.

Concealed, Mother Gothel and the Stabbington Brothers observe the heroine and hero from a distance. Manipulating them as easily as she thought she could her daughter, she assures her co-conspirators their patience will be richly rewarded. Surprisingly naïve, because their rampant greed makes them want to believe her, they consent to bide their time.

The next morning, from far overhead among the treetops, we observe Eugene and Rapunzel sleeping peacefully on the ground, on opposite sides of the extinguished fire. Rapunzel is surrounded by her hair, which looks like a protective shield. Protecting her from whom? The old Flynn Rider? A butterfly flutters down towards them. The setting is idyllic. At closer range we see Eugene smile in his sleep. Is he dreaming of Rapunzel, superhuman strength or his satchel? We can’t be certain. And neither can Rapunzel.
Liquid drops fall on Eugene’s cheek. Rain from an approaching summer shower? Perhaps an excuse for he and Rapunzel to huddle together under a tree, as happened in the 1934 romantic comedy *It Happened One Night*? But then a reverse camera angle reveals an angry Maximus looming over Eugene, snorting and dripping sweat on his sworn enemy. Eugene awakens and glances up. “Well, I hope you’re here to apologize” he remarks, then lays his head back down and closes his eyes. Perhaps he’s been lulled into a state of tranquility by his new intimacy with Rapunzel, and thinks Max will be equally agreeable to ending an old feud. Or maybe he thinks Max is just a dream. In either case, he’s in for a rude awakening.

Rapunzel awakens to the sound of Eugene screaming as Maximus drags him away by his boot. Defending both her dream of seeing the floating lanterns and the man she has come to care about, she springs to the rescue, engaging in a tug of war with the horse. The boot comes off in Max’s mouth, sending Eugene tumbling in the opposite direction. Displaying quick reflexes, Rapunzel repeatedly blocks the horse’s attempts to get at the hero, who is properly terrified. With Pascal’s help (the secret potential she always had), she charms Max into submission, as she did the thugs and ruffians at the Snuggly Duckling.

Bruno Bettelheim wrote that a girl taming a horse in a fairy tale was psychologically equivalent to a young woman learning to control her own sexuality, as well as that of a man. But that if she consciously thought of it in those terms, it would ruin the experience for her. Whether or not Rapunzel is fighting such a battle is open to question. But I find it fascinating that in this scene she acts forcefully, courageously and effectively as a mediator between two characters defined early in the film as representatives of crime and punishment, or id and superego, as Bettelheim might otherwise describe them. Unlike the Stabbington Brothers and Mother Gothel, Eugene
and Max are still emotionally flexible, capable of being influenced and reconciled by Rapunzel, the ego of the group. They are not hopelessly locked into narrow patterns of perception and reaction.

Succumbing to Rapunzel’s assault of flattery and sympathy, Max sits, drops Eugene’s boot and wags his tail like a happy puppy. “You are such a good boy,” she coos. He swallows the bait. Perhaps accustomed to strict discipline in the King’s service, he cannot resist her soft touch, though he tries. “You all tired from chasing the bad man all over the place?” Rapunzel inquires, placating Max’s dream by describing Eugene as “bad,” which she no longer believes. Eugene, meanwhile, doesn’t see the method in Rapunzel’s madness, protesting that it’s Max who is “bad.” Clearly man and horse could never have reached a compromise through their own efforts. Ignoring Eugene’s objection, Rapunzel continues to sweet talk Maximus. As a manipulator of emotions, she puts Flynn Rider and his vaunted “smolder” to shame.

Maximus grins and whinnies with childlike pleasure when Rapunzel describes him as a “big sweetheart.” Noticing the buckle on his bridle, she respectfully calls him by his name. Something Flynn foolishly failed to do when he first encountered Max, whom he addressed as “Fleabag.” Eugene is both astonished at and skeptical of her masterly performance. What Rapunzel does in this scene is not entirely different from what Flynn and Mother Gothel tried to do to her, except that Rapunzel manipulates for a worthy cause that is not detrimental to the target of her efforts.

Rapunzel urges Maximus and Eugene to agree on a temporary truce so Eugene can help Rapunzel achieve her dream. I suspect she’s hoping for a more lasting peace, since Eugene’s fate is now of interest to her as well. Eugene relents first, offering to shake hands with his sworn enemy. Max refuses to reciprocate, until Rapunzel informs him today is her birthday, “just so
you know," shamelessly exploiting her feminine charms for all they’re worth. Her magic goes far beyond her hair. Exposure to the world outside the tower has taught her a few lessons about how to persuade others to do what she wants. She’s definitely wiser, but not in the cynical manner of Mother Gothel, whose manipulation of the Stabbington Brothers will prove contrary to their welfare.

Joseph Campbell writes about heroes who must overcome their own egos in order to embrace the world (The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 133-134). Sometimes the borders of that ego extend out to include a tribe of like-minded people, with the rest of the world defined as evil aliens. Rapunzel’s original “tribe,” as it were, consisted only of Mother Gothel and a secret, perhaps imaginary friend named Pascal. Breaking out of her tribal village, the tower in which Mother Gothel kept her confined, Rapunzel gradually expands that tribe to include the thugs and ruffians of the Snuggly Duckling, Eugene Fitzherbert and now Maximus. Soon it will encompass an entire village of strangers. It is that generosity of spirit that allows the heroine to grow and mature, despite her occasionally terrifying experiences in the world outside her sanctuary/prison. Equally important, it is that same generosity to which former strangers and foes, most importantly Eugene, respond in kind.

The sound of bells in the distance distracts Rapunzel, drawing her away from the two males. Max takes advantage of her inattention to punch Eugene in the gut with his hoof. It’s very satisfying for the horse, judging by his wicked grin. Not so much for Eugene, who collapses to the ground in pain. Enmity remains between them despite Rapunzel’s healing influence. Little bits of action like this remind us how tentative emotional progress and maturity can be. How quickly we can backslide, even in a fairy tale. Think ahead to Astrid, in How to Train Your
Dragon, briefly falling back into her old Viking warrior mentality following her amazing ride with Hiccup on the back of a once feared and despised dragon. Like heroine Rapunzel, hero Hiccup encourages the better nature of other characters.

Rapunzel reaches the kingdom at last. The King and Queens’ castle sits high on a hill, overlooking a picturesque village. An arch over the entrance to that village recalls a similar arch on the tower’s interior wall that Rapunzel once measured with her artist’s thumb for a painting she did of the floating lights. Perhaps the latter was another subconscious recollection of the former—another building block in her quest to reclaim her lost childhood.

Thrilled to be on the threshold of realizing her dream, and exposed for the first time to an entire community of people, Rapunzel silently mouths the word “Wow!” while glancing back to share her excitement with Eugene, Max and all of us, off-screen. It’s a great moment. Would that we could all experience such thrilling moments of discovery after childhood. But visible in the same shot is a Flynn Rider “Wanted” poster nailed to the same bridge leading to the village that is the cause of Rapunzel’s joy. For Eugene the village is a dangerous place. Yet he is captivated by Rapunzel’s infectious reaction to it. He returns her smile. Some things are worth the risk. And this time the prize for him is not the stolen crown or the prospect of material wealth. Eugene has come a long way on his journey, despite the fact that it began as Rapunzel’s alone, with him as merely her blackmailed guide.

Still, old habits die hard. Grabbing the “Wanted” poster, Eugene crumples it into a ball and stuffs it into Max’s mouth. Exploiting the truce Rapunzel negotiated between them, he taunts his former nemesis. Turnabout is fair play. Max spits the poster at Eugene’s head, forcing the wanted thief to wear his original, villainous identity. That simple caricature of criminality was
once all Max could see in Flynn. And as we know, Flynn never found that image, especially its nasal variations, particularly flattering. The horse laughs. The "thief" rips the poster away from his face. The two former antagonists resume their old fight, until Rapunzel’s personal enforcer, Pascal, signals them to stop. For Rapunzel’s sake, they comply. Though not without sneaking in a couple more jabs at each other. The truce between inflexible moral judgment and total self-indulgence is fragile.

Our quartet enters the village on a day of celebration. It’s the birthday of the Lost Princess. There are crowds of people, elaborate decorations, including banners featuring images of the royal sunflower on a purple background, and street musicians playing lively music. Rapunzel marvels at sights and sounds entirely new to her. A family consisting of mother, father and a small child passes by. Riding on his dad’s shoulders, the child looks at Rapunzel, enjoying the kind of childhood she never had.

Despite the thrill of being surrounded by people and activity, Rapunzel is inexperienced and awkward in this new setting. The village isn’t quite paradise. She bumps into passersby and a flock of geese. Her long, unwieldy hair, always a mixed blessing, gets stepped on. A symbol of Rapunzel’s over-extended childhood, among other things, that hair is an impediment to her maturity as a woman. She is no longer the little girl she was when she was prematurely taken away from the village.

Coming to her rescue, Eugene gathers up Rapunzel’s cumbersome hair and whistles to four young village girls, braiding each other’s hair nearby, to lend a hand. They are delighted with so monumental a challenge. Rapunzel sits patiently while they braid her hair into a manageable length and shape, decorating it with flowers.
Eugene admires the results of their handiwork, until distracted by a group of soldiers passing by. He ducks behind a wall. Despite the truce with Max, he is still a wanted criminal. The reluctance he once expressed about returning to the kingdom has diminished, thanks to his growing fondness for Rapunzel and new determination to help make her dream come true. But he hasn’t completely escaped from his past, and neither has Rapunzel. Mother Gothel, the Stabbington Brothers and the King’s soldiers are all lurking in the vicinity.

Rapunzel thanks the girls for making her hair manageable. Eugene is enchanted by her appearance. Max grins at him, knowing that Eugene’s affection for the heroine is genuine rather than just a tactical pose for a selfish purpose. But a remnant of the old, emotionally defensive Flynn Rider reasserts itself as Eugene sourly pushes away the horse’s grinning muzzle, in effect denying any romantic interest in the young woman who has changed them both for the better. Neither we nor Max are convinced by Eugene’s show of indifference.

From far overhead we watch Eugene and Rapunzel wait in line, like other villagers, to buy food from a vendor. Rapunzel, fascinated by everything the village has to offer, impulsively drags him from one distraction to the next, like a kid exploring a toy store or a theme park for the first time. Wandering away from yet another food vendor line-up, she spots a mosaic of the royal family, painted on a wall in the village square. The King and Queen cradle their daughter as she appeared when she was kidnapped: a golden-haired, green-eyed infant secure and happy in her parents’ arms. “It’s for the Lost Princess” explains a young village girl to an even younger child as she lays a flower at the foot of the painting. Rapunzel stares at the baby in the mural. Is she on the verge of recognizing herself, as she seemed to be when she donned the crown back at the tower and gazed at herself in a mirror? Curiously, the King and Queen appear in shadow, while
their daughter is sunlit—perhaps a reflection of the partial independence Rapunzel has already achieved as a result of leaving her tower, facing danger in the outside world and getting to know Eugene.

Self-recognition doesn't come quite yet. Rapunzel succumbs to another distraction in this feast of plenty. Street musicians catch her attention. The music of a recorder echoes her enthusiasm. Eugene, no longer the thief he was, pays a vendor for bread and cheese. He turns back to Rapunzel, thinking she's standing beside him. Instead, he spots her dancing in the village square, and is mesmerized by the spectacle. One by one Rapunzel corrals villagers of all ages into her dance, until it becomes a communal celebration of the sheer joy of being alive and together. As she proved to be with the thugs and ruffians at the Snuggly Duckling, and again with Eugene and Maximus in the forest, Rapunzel has the power to awaken in others what she feels. And perhaps because of her extended, involuntary seclusion, she sees and feels so much more than do the more worldly and jaded. Mother Gothel and the Stabbington Brothers are no longer capable of seeing the world through her eyes. Eugene, Maximus and the villagers are. The rousing, rhythmical music of the “Kingdom Dance” increases in volume and pace, joined by vigorous hand-clapping and dancing. Rapunzel makes of the entire village an extended version of the family she lost.

Crossing his arms in a posture of contemplation, Eugene watches Rapunzel in fond amazement. She beckons him to join her. He gently waves her off. Still the self-protective loner, he can't quite make that final leap into trust and love. So Max gives him a not so gentle shove with his butt, launching the reluctant hero smack into the middle of the celebrants. Eugene glances back at him peevishly, but cannot resist being pulled into the dance. Maximus winnies
in triumph. He is, or is capable of being, the “old sweetheart” Rapunzel saw in him.

The communal dance is interrupted several times by brief flashbacks to earlier moments in the Rapunzel’s and Eugene’s exploration of the village. The same jubilant music overlaps and celebrates the progression of two distinct, competing dreams—both of them Rapunzel’s, one of them Eugene’s. Her recovery of a lost childhood and family (the villagers playing surrogate family) counterpoints the advent of her adult love with Eugene. Flashbacks depicting the latter include Eugene buying Rapunzel a purple handkerchief with the royal symbol imprinted on it. She excitedly compares it to one of the larger, similar banners flying overhead.

We return to the dance, but this time to observe both dreams in progress. Dancing with villagers, Eugene reaches out for Rapunzel, and she for him. Finally, their first dance together—until they are separated again by villagers pulling them in opposite directions, into different groups dancing around a huge image of the royal symbol drawn on the cobblestones of the village square. Rapunzel’s desire to re-discover her lost childhood in some way interferes with her competing desire to enjoy a grown-up relationship with Eugene. A subsequent flashback reveals that it was Rapunzel herself who drew that giant symbol in the village square, using chalk Eugene probably purchased for her from a vendor.

Next we see hero and heroine sharing a private moment, smiling at each other and eating pastries while nestled in a small nook in a wall as unsuspecting soldiers pass by. Long forgotten is the phony meal Flynn Rider once promised Rapunzel at the Snuggly Duckling. Both are discovering love for the first time.

Back to the dance, and the present, Rapunzel leaps, making good use of her self-taught ballet lessons in the tower. Then another pre-dance flashback, where we see her and Eugene in the
village library, sitting on the floor beside each other, surrounded by open books, perusing one containing a map of the known world. Rapunzel eagerly points to one of its features. With Eugene’s help, she’s learning more about the wider world she was brought up to fear: a world even larger than what she’s explored thus far. This brief impression of expanding consciousness will be repeated by Hiccup and his guide, Toothless, in *How to Train Your Dragon 2*, where Hiccup draws a map of a new island he discovered by flying on the dragon’s back. But in *Tangled*, romantic love is one of the elements of the enlarged world Rapunzel and Eugene bring to each other.

Sunlight streaming into the library through a window illuminates the characters as they enlighten each other. Their secluded moment of quiet contentment is then juxtaposed with the larger, communal celebration as we return to the dance. Eugene whirls around with a villager while searching eagerly for Rapunzel, who for a moment is dancing by herself, deliriously happy with the fulfillment of part of her *old* dream.

Finally, heroine and hero come face to face, holding each other in a dance pose just as the exhilarating music stops. They’re ready to pursue their new, romantic dream with each other. But Rapunzel’s original dream, of seeing the floating lights, which represent a dual, somewhat contradictory dream of freedom and of returning home to her parents, disrupts their new one. “To the boats!” a villager calls out. Suddenly shy and self-conscious again, Rapunzel and Eugene let go of each other. The villagers applaud. Like Max, they are more aware of what the heroine and hero are feeling than the young couple is willing to admit to themselves. Romance will have to wait a little longer.

Later that night, Eugene rows Rapunzel a short distance out to sea in a presumably rented, not
stolen, gondola. The water is calm, reflecting the castle and village with just enough distortion to render both a dreamlike impressionist painting. Max, left standing on the dock, looks deserted and forlorn. Taking pity on the horse, Eugene tosses him a bag of apples, the horse’s favorite treat. Max regards the gift and his benefactor with suspicion. Eugene assures him he bought rather than stole the apples. Satisfied, Max gobbles up the legal fruit. Eugene grins and adds, “Most of them.” Max stops eating, head hanging low and looking miserably guilty. The battle between former law-breaker and formerly unrelenting law enforcer continues, but in much milder terms.

Eating “illegal” apples are superego Max’s Garden of Eden moment of temptation. But instead of damning him, they humanize him, taking the brutal edge off his previously fanatical crusade against wrongdoing. Just as our near-certainty that Eugene obtained the apples legally reassures us that he is no longer a thief. By tossing Max a bag of apples, Eugene does something nice for his former enemy, as Max did for Eugene when he pushed him into the dance, prompting him to accept Rapunzel’s invitation. In both cases, Rapunzel is the common denominator in their improved behavior and the rewards they receive in return.

Rapunzel inquires where they’re going. She expected nothing more than to watch the floating lanterns from within the village. But Eugene wants to make her experience as memorable as possible. “Well, the best day of your life, I figure you should have a decent seat.” Making Rapunzel’s dream come true has become part of his dream. What a contrast to a much earlier incident when he responded to her exclamation of “Best day ever!”, as she swung around a tree by her hair, with a look of boredom and irritation on his face.

Eugene rowing Rapunzel out to sea to give her a better view of the floating lantern show is his
answer to Rapunzel healing his injured hand in the forest. She played the loving mother to a man who never enjoyed such attention as a child. Now he plays the loving father to woman who never received such kindness from Mother Gothel, unless it was in the form of a bribe. Like a dad hoisting his little girl onto his shoulders to give her a better view of a parade, Eugene gives Rapunzel the best lantern show experience he can. And this parental aspect of their relationship does not detract from their romantic feelings for one another. On the contrary, it’s an essential component of their love. They’re taking care of each other in even the smallest, as well as the more spectacular, action-packed ways.

Pascal sits on Eugene’s shoulder as the hero rows out to sea. Instead of rudely brushing him off, as he did in the forest near the tower, Eugene gently sets the chameleon on a little pedestal from which he can better enjoy the light show. The scoundrel formerly known as Flynn Rider has become remarkably considerate of others. Though on a subconscious level, it’s possible he’s taking Rapunzel out of the village and away from its distractions in order to fulfill his new dream as well as her old one.

Reaching their exclusive vantage point, Eugene and Rapunzel turn back to watch the festivities. Eugene senses Rapunzel’s uneasiness about something. She admits she’s worried the achievement of her lifelong dream won’t be everything she hopes. “It will be” he reassures her, again placing her happiness above his own. “And what if it is? What do I do then?” That’s a question applicable to a lot of dreams, in fairy tales and elsewhere. A maturing Rapunzel suspects the limitations of her childhood dream. But once more Eugene has the right answer. “Well, that’s the good part, I guess. You get to find a new dream.” The unspoken implication being that he already has.
The King and Queen, their hope fading as empty years pass by without fulfillment of their dream, launch a solitary lantern for their long-lost daughter, one more time. The Queen wipes a tear from her husband’s cheek. They share both disappointment and hope, making the former a little more bearable. Though they are secondary characters, what we see of their interaction illustrates a mature, enduring love towards which Rapunzel and Eugene are striving. Their solitary lantern triggers the sympathetic launch of thousands more by the villagers below. From far overhead we get a broad view of the dazzling light show, then close in slowly on the tiny gondola at sea, returning to the young woman for whom the floating lanterns are meant and to whom they mean so much. Yet neither Rapunzel nor her parents realize their separate dreams are intertwined and in close proximity.

Eugene gives flowers (purchased, not stolen, we presume) to Rapunzel to set afloat on the water. But when she spots lanterns rising in the sky by the hundreds, she gets so excited she nearly tips the boat in her rush to find the best position from which to view them. Eugene tumbles in the wake of her enthusiasm, momentarily forgotten by her. Rapunzel’s dream of returning to her real home has not yet yielded to her dream of a grown-up love. She appears visually surrounded by floating lights filling the sky above and reflected in the water below.

Rapunzel reacts in song to the culmination of her dream. “Standing here, it’s all so clear. I’m where I’m meant to be. All at once, everything has shifted, now that I see you.” But her lyrics say more than she realizes. “I’m where I’m meant to be” anticipates her realization in a later scene that she is the Lost Princess. “Now that I see you” anticipates by mere seconds her thoughts returning to Eugene. Her gaze shifts from the myriad of floating lanterns to the young man sitting near her, smiling fondly as he holds out two lanterns in his hands. Not merely one,
representing either Rapunzel’s original dream or his own, “on an island that I own, tanned and rested and alone, surrounded by enormous piles of money,” but two lanterns, representing the dreams of both characters. The King and Queens’ single lantern, by contrast, represents their long shared sense of loss and hope. The hero and heroine are on a journey towards that same state of solidarity.

Rapunzel re-joins Eugene in the middle of the boat. She gives him the satchel she’s concealed ever since Mother Gothe! gave it to her. The object of what was his dream now becomes a symbol of her trust. She admits she was afraid to give it to him until now. “I’m not scared any more. You know what I mean?” Eugene, who earlier in their journey together would have grabbed the satchel and deserted Rapunzel in a shot, as Mother Gothe! predicted he would, now pushes it away and replies, “I’m starting to.” Fear was a common factor motivating these two characters. For him the fear of betrayal and desertion compelled him to seek security through material wealth and emotional isolation. For her it was fear of the world outside her tower, which she overcame by dreaming of seeing the distant floating lights in person, and expressing that dream through her art.

Rapunzel smiles warmly at Eugene, and together they launch their lanterns, which circle one another, signaling a mutual dream. Eugene adds his own verses to what began as Rapunzel’s solo. And this time no one compels him to do so. “Chasing down a daydream [the pathetic dream he revealed at the Snuggly Duckling]. Living in a blur. All the time never really seeing things the way they were. Now she’s here, shining in the starlight …”

Eugene watches Rapunzel in wonderment as she points excitedly to the myriad of lanterns floating towards their boat. In a disembodied voice he lets us know what’s on his mind. “Now
she's here, suddenly I know.” Rapunzel captures a lantern in her hand, then launches it again, symbolically exchanging one dream for another. “If she’s here, it’s crystal clear, I’m where I’m meant to go.” Eugene takes Rapunzel’s hand in his, drawing her attention away from the lanterns and back to him: another action suggesting a new dream replacing an old one. Smiling, she reciprocates. Their voices mingle, directly rather than disembodied this time, as they repeat previous verses of the song. One sings, the other responds, then they sing together. Back at the Snuggly Duckling their verses in “I’ve Got a Dream” were separate, shared no lyrics, and in Eugene’s case were prompted by a threat of harm. “Now that I see you” they conclude in harmony, twice. “Only after one has attained inner harmony within oneself can one hope to find it in relations with others” (Bettelheim, 235).

Finally comes the long-awaited, hard-fought, inevitable kiss between heroine and hero. Pascal blushes from his observation platform. This could have been a moment just too cute for the good of the film. Instead, it becomes another of the film’s great moments of false expectation. Rapunzel and Eugene move closer to each other. He brushes strands of blonde hair away from her eyes, metaphorically clearing her vision (“it’s all so clear”) and implying that her magical hair is part of the problem that kept her from seeing the truth. But as they move in for their climactic kiss, Eugene stops short, catching sight of the Stabbington Brothers watching them from the shore opposite the village. Their lantern is green, not golden like the ones symbolizing Rapunzel’s and Eugene’s shared dream. The tree line behind the Brothers is dark and ominous. They disappear behind a rock. Now you see them, now you don’t. They’re a chilling reminder to Eugene of his own past, and of what he might have become had he never met Rapunzel.

“Is everything okay?” asks Rapunzel after their kiss is interrupted. When Eugene asked her
a similar question a short time ago, she replied honestly, admitting her fear of being disappointed by the floating lights. Eugene, unfortunately, now deceives. Assuring her that everything is fine, he tries to shield her from a lurking danger rooted in his criminal past. It’s a noble impulse. But by not sharing the ugly truth with her, he makes a critical mistake that will soon breed doubts about him in her mind.

There is something magical about their brief isolation at sea, insulated from worldly complications and their own troubled pasts. But they cannot remain there, any more than Hiccup and Toothless can remain alone in their cove, in How to Train Your Dragon. Rowing their boat to shore, Eugene leaves Rapunzel while he takes the satchel from her and cryptically announces that he has to take care of something. A flicker of doubt clouds Rapunzel’s eyes as they dart between Eugene and the satchel. Did she misread their new understanding? Is Eugene Fitzherbert really Flynn Rider, instead of the other way around? She wants to believe him, but...

Rapunzel and Pascal watch Eugene depart with the satchel. “It’s all right, Pascal,” she reassures her oldest, trusted friend— in other words, herself. But the expression on her face says otherwise. It’s foggy now. Eugene disappears into that fog. The same fog of confusion referred to in “I See the Light.” The fog that now obscures from her and our view the floating lanterns that came to symbolize their new, shared dream of trust and love.

Locating his former partners in crime, Eugene plays the old, wisecracking Flynn Rider again, knowing the Stabbington Brothers are much too cynical to believe the new and improved Eugene Fitzherbert. He gives them the satchel and crown. “But we want her instead,” one of them announces with sinister silkiness. So their dream has changed as well. Not in quality, but in quantity. Rapunzel’s magic hair is worth much more than a paltry crown of jewels. Kidnapping
is worse than theft.

Fog again obscures Rapunzel’s vision as she watches a male figure approach from the gloom. Assuming that it’s Eugene returning to her, she’s relieved, admitting to him she feared he had taken the crown and deserted her. But then the shadowy figure splits into two—the Stabbington Brothers. It’s a very creepy image, and not coincidentally a haunting reminder of what Eugene Fitzherbert/Flynn Rider could have become if his old dream had consumed him and Rapunzel had not guided him to a new one.

The foggy image of Eugene’s presumed silhouette dividing into the Stabbington Brothers and approaching Rapunzel reminds me of *The Wolf Man*, a 1941 horror film that plays like a twisted fairy tale, filled with nocturnal fog that metaphorically echoes increasing confusion in the mind of its hero/monster, Larry Talbot (Lon Chaney, Jr.). In a sense *The Wolf Man* is *Tangled* in reverse, with a hero who becomes ever more deeply entangled in a nightmare partly originating in his own mind and partly imposed on him by external forces. Eugene and Rapunzel were on the verge of attaining clarity in their lives. Their fog lifted, briefly, until outside forces conspired to confuse them. In *The Wolf Man* the fallen hero attacks the heroine whom he loves. For a while Rapunzel will believe she has been betrayed by Eugene. At one point in the 1941 movie a superstitious, elderly gypsy woman warns the heroine, “Don’t go through the woods, or he will find you.” That sounds like a line from “Little Red Riding Hood.” *Tangled* is not a horror film, but it has such moments. Fear can distort anything.

“He did,” smugly replies one of the Brothers to Rapunzel’s relief that Eugene hadn’t deserted her. As proof, the villain points to a boat sailing towards the village on the opposite shore. At the wheel of that boat stands the silhouetted figure of Eugene. Rapunzel calls out to him, but he
doesn’t reply. He doesn’t even turn his head to acknowledge her. What else is she to think? Savoring her pain, the villains twist the knife a little more. “Fair trade. The crown for the girl with the magic hair. How much do you think someone would pay to stay young and healthy forever?” asks one of them rhetorically as he prepares to imprison Rapunzel in a large sack, reducing her to just another jeweled crown in a satchel.

Rapunzel flees, until her long hair snags on a tree branch and holds her back, once again proving a burden to her. But in the distance she hears the sound of rescue. Mother Gothel calls out anxiously for her. Rapunzel responds, finding her mother standing over the unconscious bodies of the Stabbington Brothers, with a club in her hand. How diabolically she has staged this event, fogging Rapunzel’s mind with a false impression of maternal devotion in the face of Eugene’s apparent betrayal and two genuinely evil thugs. “My precious girl! Are you all right? Are you hurt?” she anxiously inquires, for once with no ironic trace of insincerity in her voice. Mother Gothel plays the loving, protective parent to the hilt, knowing Rapunzel is extremely vulnerable at this moment.

Torn between an old dream she had discarded and a new one that has apparently discarded her, Rapunzel gazes out one last time at Eugene’s receding boat. She is crushed. Alan Menken’s background music eloquently reinforces this moment when Rapunzel’s jubilant embrace of the world she had so long been denied suddenly shrinks back into a defensive shell. A few floating lanterns visible through the fog symbolize her fading dreams of love and trust. Rapunzel turns back to Mother Gothel, who stands with maternal arms open and green lantern in hand. The heroine runs into those sheltering arms, conceding, “You were right, Mother. You were right about everything.” She swallows the old woman’s elaborate deception hook, line and sinker. It’s
a dramatic moment as potentially life-changing as Rapunzel’s first, tentative contact with the ground outside the tower.

Arm in arm, mother and daughter begin their trek back to the security of their tower. It’s not difficult to imagine, after recent events, how easily Rapunzel could eventually become the embittered, cynical, utterly selfish old woman Mother Gothel has long been. The evidence of that selfishness is clearly visible to us. Streaks of gray in Mother Gothel’s hair and age spots on her skin reveal that she’s badly in need of a rejuvenating fix from the teenager’s magical hair.

Eugene’s boat approaches the castle on the mainland. The fog is very thick now, clouding the minds of soldiers on the battlements who see only a wanted criminal named Flynn Rider and the stolen crown in his hands, but not the ropes that shackle his hands to the boat wheel. The soldiers, Eugene, Rapunzel and even the Stabbington Brothers were tricked by the villainy of Mother Gothel. Regaining consciousness, Eugene calls out for Rapunzel, concerned about her safety rather than his own. The soldiers take him prisoner. They are deaf to his pleas on her behalf. But not so Max, still waiting on the dock like a faithful watchdog. Eugene’s desperate shouts of “Rapunzel!” tell Max all he needs to know about what really happened on the other shore. No fog clouds his mind.

Later, Eugene paces his prison cell, still preoccupied with Rapunzel’s welfare. The guards come for him, their grim silence informing him that he is to be hanged for his crime. The royal emblem on their breastplates is deeply ironic. As representatives of the King and Queen, the guards think they are acting in the best interests of the kingdom. Instead they unwittingly prevent the rescue and return of their Lost Princess by escorting her potential rescuer to his doom.

When Chance brought Rapunzel and Flynn Rider together at the beginning of the movie, they
had little in common with and even less regard for each other. Each was to the other nothing more than a means to a selfish end: Flynn to get back his satchel and Rapunzel to see the floating lights. But now that they’ve been forcibly separated, they cannot stop thinking about each other. Eugene is deeply worried about Rapunzel and frustrated at being prevented from helping her. Rapunzel, meanwhile, sits heartbroken and listless on her bed, back in the tower. Mother Gothel removes the last village flower from her daughter’s now unbraided hair, restoring that hair to its earlier appearance. It is once more a fountain of youth for the mother and a burden for the teenager who is being compelled to remain a child. But Mother Gothel’s authority cannot be so easily restored. Rapunzel still thinks about Eugene, despite his apparent betrayal of her. Her new dream is too powerful to be given up easily.

“There. It never happened,” announces Mother Gothe! cheerfully, hoping for a return to the way things were. “I’m making hazel nut soup,” she adds as she leaves the room. But it’s been a long time since hazel nut soup could satisfy Rapunzel’s needs. The young woman cannot be consoled. So her mother drags out the old “I told you so” routine, continuing a very old parental pattern of sweet and sour. With double cruelty she scolds, “I tried to warn you what was out there. The world is dark [like Gothel’s hair, which has obviously been rejuvenated] and selfish and cruel. It defies even the slightest ray of sunshine. It destroys it.” With that pessimistic bit of philosophy she closes the dark red curtains to Rapunzel’s room. The curtains match Mother Gothel’s red dress. She destroys the slightest ray of sunshine.

All the vitality and defiance that we saw in Rapunzel the teenager has apparently deserted her. Seated with eyes cast down and hands folded in her lap, she is the very image of passivity and submission. But initial appearances can be misleading in this film, as we should have learned by
now. It's time for another surprising reversal. The new, improved, wiser Rapunzel is capable of a little deception herself. She opens her hands to reveal the purple handkerchief with the royal symbol imprinted on it—the one Eugene gave her back at the village. She kept it because she still *wants* to believe in him. But it's difficult. Pascal tries to comfort her. He's a dear and trusted friend, but like any childhood toy, not enough to stave off the disappointment of adult yearnings.

Rapunzel lies back on her bed, holding the handkerchief to her breast. Her profound sadness is given voice by the background music. She holds up the handkerchief and compares it to her paintings on the ceiling. Through a subjective camera we share her point of view. The camera zooms in slowly on a ceiling mural she painted long ago. One picture in that mural is of Rapunzel asleep in a bed lifted by birds into a starry sky—perhaps a depiction of her escape from the tower through both dreams and art. A portion of her real bed frame is visible in the foreground of the same shot, reminding us and her of the acute disappointment she suffered when that dream came true. But there is more to be seen in the mural. Rapunzel’s art expresses subconscious memories as well as conscious desires. *Tangled* is dramatically fuelled by a wonderful tension between life and dream, reality and wish-fulfillment, fact and imagination. Images within her art trigger memories of past events.

Rapunzel’s face moves from shadow into light ("I See the Light") as she begins to notice sunflower patterns she for some reason painted into her murals. While her actual eyes open wide with recognition, her mind’s eye and we see the painted flowers turn golden and emerge from other, now irrelevant material surrounding them. Starting from far overhead, among those painted sun flowers, a reverse angle camera spirals dizzily down towards Rapunzel’s upturned face, its rapid descent fuelled by the power of her sudden realization. She now *stands* on the
floor, no longer reclining listlessly on her bed. Sun flowers are reflected in the pupils of her eyes. Light breaks through darkness, illuminating Rapunzel’s truth, not Mother Gothel’s false projection of the truth.

“What makes life bearable even in the worst circumstances is the image of the good mother which we have internalized, so that the disappearance of the external symbol does not matter” (Bettelheim, 258). We see a fuzzy image from Rapunzel’s dim recollection of her real parents, the King and Queen, standing beside her crib, gazing down fondly at her. We see them from Rapunzel’s vantage point as an infant. That image in turn connects with a much more recent memory, still fuzzy around the edges, of the village square mosaic depicting King, Queen and their blond-haired, green-eyed baby girl. Then we jump backwards to a recollection between the first two, of Rapunzel gazing at herself in a mirror when she first placed Flynn Rider’s stolen crown on her head. By association she ferrets out the truth about herself. Stunned, she collapses against her vanity, nearly knocking it over. Vanity is not a personality trait we associate with Rapunzel. But curiosity is. And so, lately, is pride, which to some degree is essential for anyone to function as an independent human being. Prideful anger is what she brings as a weapon to her next confrontation with Mother Gothel.

Rapunzel gazes up again, at the painted mural that has unlocked her past. Pulsing background music sounds like an excited heartbeat or a ticking clock, the latter underlining the fact that time is rapidly running out for the heroine to rescue the hero. Eugene is the promise of a future that Rapunzel’s phony mother would deny her.

Mother Gothel, hearing a commotion coming from Rapunzel’s bedroom, demands to know “What’s going on up there?” as she climbs the staircase to investigate. Her tone of voice is
condescending, like that of a parent suppressing the bedtime shenanigans of an unruly child.

She’s living in a fool’s paradise, because Rapunzel is no longer that child.

Eugene, his hands shackled behind his back, is escorted by guards to the place of execution. He’s still more anxious about Rapunzel’s fate than his own. Passing a row of prison cells, he is surprised to see the Stabbington Brothers confined to one of them. He assumed they kidnapped Rapunzel and were long gone. At great risk to himself, he knocks over the guards, deftly jumps up with his knees tucked, pulls his handcuffed hands from behind his back to in front of him, reaches through the cell bars, grabs one of his former partners by the collar and demands to know how they knew about Rapunzel. Previously we saw him confident, arrogant, wisecracking, charming, annoyed and worried. This is the first time we’ve seen him truly angry, in the sense of being fully committed to a cause. There is nothing flippant about him now.

Turning coward, now that he’s a prisoner and worried about his own miserable fate, one of the brothers reveals it was “the old lady” who told them about Rapunzel. Eugene suddenly realizes it was Rapunzel’s mother who deceived everyone and sabotaged the heroine’s trust in him. Without this information, and the courage that allowed him to extract it from his former partner, Eugene would have no idea where or from whom to rescue Rapunzel. Unfortunately, the guards quickly regain control of their prisoner. He protests in vain, “You don’t understand! She’s in trouble! Wait!” But his old reputation as a lying thief who would do and say anything to save himself fogs the minds of his captors.

Emerging from behind the red curtain Mother Gothel closed when she left her daughter’s room, Rapunzel mutters to herself, “I’m the Lost Princess.” Still confident of her power to manipulate the teenager, Mother Gothel remains her old, cantankerous self, belittling Rapunzel
and ordering the girl not to mumble because it’s annoying. Rapunzel repeats her statement, loud
and clear this time. “I am the Lost Princess, aren’t I!” That’s a rhetorical statement, not a
question. Mommy dearest is momentarily stunned into silence at the realization that Rapunzel at
last knows the truth about herself. Glaring down at Mother Gothel, who stands on a lower stair,
it’s Rapunzel who now indulges in sarcasm, having so often been the victim of it. “Did I
mumble, Mother?” She follows up with a more direct challenge. “Or should I even call you
that?” She suspects the truth behind Mother Gothel’s eighteen-year-old lie.

Ever the resourceful adversary, Mother Gothel tries to laugh away Rapunzel’s “ridiculous”
implication. It’s the same word an over-confident Flynn Rider used to mock the Stabbington
Brothers back at the damn site, until he was made to look ridiculous a moment later. Now it’s
Mother Gothel’s turn to suffer the consequences of her folly. Rapunzel pushes her away. “It was
you! It was all you!” she accuses her phony parent. Mother Gothel falls back on one of her now
tired old tricks, playing the martyred, self-sacrificing mother to an ungrateful child. “Everything
I did was to protect you.” Maybe she believes that lie herself, because it absolves her of guilt.
But it’s too late. An angry Rapunzel pushes past her and heads down the tower steps towards
freedom. “I’ve spent my entire life hiding from people who would use me for my powers.”

Switching tactics again, Mother Gothel tries to be firm and authoritative, but that too fails this
time. The rebellious teenager has no more timidity left in her. “I should have been hiding from
you!” Mother Gothel is reduced to desperation. “Where will you go?”

The camera cuts away to Eugene being dragged helplessly to the gallows. That impression is
wish-fulfillment for Mother Gothel, to whom we abruptly return in the next shot. “He won’t be
there for you,” she tells Rapunzel, guessing correctly where her daughter intends to go. With a
note of desperation now in her voice, Rapunzel asks, “What did you do to him?” Cruelly proclaiming that Eugene is to be hanged for his crimes, Mother Gothel tries to crush the girl’s newfound spirit of independence, as she did earlier when she convinced her of Eugene’s betrayal.

Rapunzel is distraught—a moment of weakness Mother Gothel immediately exploits. “All of this is as it should be,” she tells her victim in a soothing voice, attempting to convince the young woman that her future is governed entirely by Fate rather than free will. She reaches out to pat Rapunzel’s head—a demeaning gesture meant to pacify a child, or a pet. And for a moment Rapunzel appears childlike, vulnerable, easy to manipulate. But she changes back in an instant, reaching up stop Mother Gothel’s patronizing hand. “No!” is a magic word when used in the right circumstances. “You were wrong about the world. And you were wrong about me. And I will never let you use my hair again!”

More accustomed to restraining than to being restrained, Mother Gothel pulls her hand loose from Rapunzel’s grasp, knocking over her own mirror in the process. The same mirror in which she’s admired her restored youth countless times, it shatters on the floor, marking the end of her selfish dream. Or so it seems as Rapunzel strides defiantly away from her former parent. No longer able to deceive or emotionally manipulate her daughter, Mother Gothel takes a more direct approach. “You want me to be the bad guy?” she mutters to herself. “Fine. Now I’m the bad guy.” Her tone of voice is neither mocking nor cloying, and no longer intended to manipulate Rapunzel. The time for words is over. She walks out of the camera frame in menacing pursuit of what she still sees as her disobedient child.

In a prison corridor Eugene struggles again to break free from his guards, and fails. He glances
towards something off screen, as he did in an earlier shot depicting Mother Gothel’s vindictive vision of his final walk to the gallows. But instead of the hangman’s rope he spots one of Vladimir’s little ceramic unicorns. Suddenly three doors leading in and out of the prison corridor slam shut. The guards have become the prisoners. Now it’s their turn to protest in vain.

The chief guard in charge of the prisoner detail is the same uncompromising soldier who led the pursuit of Flynn at the beginning of the movie. Like his horse, Maximus, he’s about to be brought down a peg or two, though not by Rapunzel’s gentle methods. He pounds on the door ahead of him and demands it be re-opened. Through a barred window in that door, he’s greeted by Shorty, perpetually drunk and still slurring his words, asking for the password. Confused because there is no password, the guard demands clarification, Shorty, deliberately misreading that question as an answer to his own, replies “No” and slams the window shut. The guard angrily repeats his original demand, which is again deliberately misinterpreted by Shorty as another guess at the non-existent password. “Not even close,” he replies. The guard is thus given a taste of the same frustration Eugene experienced when his pleas on behalf of Rapunzel were ignored by the same guard.

Furious, the bullheaded and not too intelligent guard falls back on the sheer power of his institutional authority, as Mother Gothel tried to do to quell Rapunzel’s defiance. He gives Shorty three seconds to open the door. It’s an empty threat mocked by Eugene’s concealed rescuers, who pick off the other soldiers like clockwork as the chief guard counts off those three seconds. We recognize a familiar hook hand reaching down from the ceiling to snatch away one of the King’s men. On “Three” the chief guard turns around to see Eugene standing alone, hands still shackled yet waving a mock-friendly greeting anyway. Attila approaches the chief guard
from behind and knocks him out with Rapunzel’s old frying pan. Falling to the floor, the victim wears the same stupefied expression on his face that Flynn Rider wore when Rapunzel knocked him out for the first time in her tower. Eugene celebrates, “Frying pans! Who knew, right?” Just one of many things he’s learned from the young woman who was at first nothing more to him than a nuisance. Rapunzel’s unlikely frying pan takes its comical place alongside King Arthur’s Excalibur, Robin Hood’s bow and arrow and Thor’s invincible hammer as an instrument of liberation.

Eugene is forced to flee when other guards break through one of the locked doors and give chase. But they are soon stopped by the gloved hand of the silent Ulf, whose bizarre mime act distracts them just long enough for massive Vladimir to stampede them into unconsciousness. Ulf glances back at us (the camera) and strikes a pose of mock consternation, as if to say, “Oh, my! What have I done!” Funny guy. The lighthearted tone of Eugene’s rescue by the former thugs and ruffians of the Snuggly Duckling contributes to another of the film’s misleading expectations. From this scene the rescue of Rapunzel and the happily-ever-after reunion of hero and heroine seem but one swashbuckling adventure away. But that won’t be the case.

Escaping into the prison courtyard, Eugene and Hook Hand encounter a horde of soldiers. Prepared for this contingency, no doubt from long experience, Hook Hand grabs Eugene and plants him on the lowered end of a horse cart. The hero is clueless as he follows his rescuer’s puzzling instructions. “Head down, arms in, knees apart.” Eugene wonders why he needs to keep his knees apart. Even this late in the story, after he’s embraced his better nature, it’s amusing to see the previously overconfident hero bewildered. Not because it chips away at his arrogance, which Rapunzel has already tamed, but because it illustrates his recently forged but not yet
comfortable trust in others.

Just before the hero and his rescuers are overrun by the King’s soldiers, Vladimir leaps from the battlements above, lands on the upper end of the cart and launches Eugene high into the air, beyond the soldiers’ reach. This beneficial act is reminiscent of a less friendly launch Flynn Rider received from Vladimir back at the Snuggly Duckling, and is one of the film’s many ironic parallels. Eugene is completely dependent on the kindness of former enemies to save himself from hanging and to help him rescue the heroine from an even worse fate.

Screaming in confusion and terror, Eugene lands on the battlements above the prison yard, precisely on the back of Maximus, who was waiting for him. It’s all part of a precisely planned prison break, executed by a group of characters who probably know a thing or two about such escapes. Eugene suddenly realizes that Max organized the elaborate rescue mission. Mr. Law Enforcement defies his former, uncompromising dream of rigid moral judgment by conspiring with a gang of thugs and ruffians to rescue a wanted thief from the King’s soldiers. That’s quite a character arc!

Though the King is never directly involved in the pursuit, capture and attempted execution of Eugene Fitzherbert, the soldiers who are directly involved are his representatives, wearing his royal insignia on their uniforms. On some abstract level the King is, like many fathers, hostile towards any man who would take his precious daughter away from him. Certainly the King would regard as unworthy a commoner like Eugene romancing his little princess. The problem for him is that Rapunzel is no longer the little girl who requires protection, and Eugene is no longer the criminal the King believes he is.

Eugene offers Max his sincere thanks. Tough guy that he is, Max shrugs it off as though it
was nothing. Eugene tries again, "No, really. Thank you." Max acknowledges his gratitude. But this is new emotional territory for Eugene, who shows his inexperience by rambling on and on about their new friendship, suggesting their previous conflict was nothing more than a simple misunderstanding. It wasn’t. But there are more urgent matters at hand, as Max silently signals with his wonderfully perturbed facial expression. This is not the time for bonding. “Yeah, you’re right. We should go” Eugene admits.

Soldiers arrive on the scene, firing arrows dangerously close to the fleeing pair. Charging across the battlements, Max and Eugene are about to be cut off by more soldiers approaching from another direction—soldiers who have no clue they’re interfering with the rescue of the Lost Princess. Visually, this moment reminds me of a scene in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) in which the soldiers of the Wicked Witch cut off the escape route of Dorothy and her new friends. But if that analogy was intended, the makers of *Tangled* overturn our expectations, again. To Eugene’s happy but terrified surprise (he’s still not wholly comfortable being dependent on others, much less former foes who are now allies), Max leaps over the soldiers, lands on the roof of an adjoining tower, slides precariously down the loose tiles of that roof and lands with a flourish on the village square below. Rapunzel’s rescuers are carried away on a wave of fairy tale logic that defies physical rules in pursuit of emotional truth. And as long as an audience recognizes that sleight-of-hand for what it is, there’s nothing wrong with it.

Gaining confidence in his new ally and fully in sync with their mission to rescue Rapunzel, Eugene coaxes Max, “Let’s see how fast you can run!” Nearly every moment in this story has its counterpart. Remember when Eugene landed on Max’s back the first time, while being pursued as a thief? He referred to Max contemptuously as “old fleabag” and ordered what he mistakenly
thought was a dumb beast to “Go!” The results were predictably disastrous. But now they are trusted partners in a unified cause. Max shoots across the bridge and plunges into the forest at breakneck speed. A montage of shots depicts Eugene and Max as superhumanly heroic, their speed accentuated by the fact that they are only fitfully visible to us through breaks in the trees. In what seems like no time at all, they reach Rapunzel’s tower. Background music reinforces their efforts at full tilt. They seem unstoppable. But we, and they, are in for another surprise.

Jumping off Max near the base of the tower, Eugene calls up for Rapunzel to let down her hair. Getting no response, he starts to climb the tower the hard way, as he did early in the story but now to an entirely different, more mature purpose. Rapunzel’s long, golden hair suddenly emerges from the window above. She must have defeated Mother Gothel on her own. To the strains of ecstatic music, Eugene climbs up that hair and into the tower. Is it time for the much-delayed final embrace and first kiss? Not yet. Courage, friendship, love and rousing music do not guarantee victory.

Climbing through the tower window, Eugene is puzzled to see Rapunzel chained up and gagged, her hands tied behind her back. Mother Gothel approaches the unsuspecting hero from behind and viciously stabs him in the gut. Her ambush superficially resembles the first time Rapunzel knocked him out with a frying pan, and occurs in the same location. Both attacks are motivated by fear. Yet their circumstances are vastly different. Rapunzel’s blow was not intended to kill. And Flynn Rider did not enter the tower as her devoted rescuer. Her blow to his head, followed by two more, knocked some sense into the stubbornly self-centered Mr. Rider. Mother Gothel’s knife, by contrast, is intended to extinguish the nobility that Rapunzel’s frying pan, and more importantly Rapunzel herself, encouraged in him.
Typically, Mother Gothel blames Rapunzel for her own crime. “Now look what you’ve done,” she accuses the young woman as Eugene collapses to the floor, mortally wounded, while Rapunzel watches in horror. “Oh don’t worry, dear. Our secret will die with him.” That’s pure sadism, because she knows Rapunzel’s only “worry” is for Eugene’s life, not for “our secret,” which Gothel alone wants to preserve.

Rapunzel strains against her chains to reach Eugene. Mother Gothel releases her, but only to drag her away from Eugene and towards the trap door in the floor that leads out of the tower, to a new and unspecified prison. Pascal comes to Rapunzel’s aid, but is ruthlessly kicked aside. A child’s imaginary friend cannot save Rapunzel or Eugene from this perilous situation. They must save themselves.

Still trying to reason with what she sees as nothing more than an irrational child, Mother Gothel snaps, “Rapunzel, really. Enough already! Stop fighting me!” Unwittingly, she provides her victim with a tactical opening. Declaring she will never stop fighting Mother Gothel, Rapunzel offers a compromise. If the old woman will let her save Eugene’s life, Rapunzel will voluntarily go away with her. She will sacrifice her own freedom, her original dream, to purchase the life of the man she loves.

From across the room Eugene makes a similar sacrifice, begging Rapunzel not to go through with the bargain. It’s their “Little Mermaid” moment, in which both heroine and hero ignore self-interest in order to rescue each other. Eugene no longer values his life more than Rapunzel’s freedom. But she ignores him, sweetening the deal for the cynical villain, who looks down at her with a mixture of interest and suspicion. Mother Gothel is ripe for persuasion, but not yet persuaded. So Rapunzel promises to stay with Mother Gothel forever, if she will only let
her save Eugene’s life. The prospect of certainty and immortality in a world that offers neither appeals to the old woman’s narcissistic temperament.

Mother Gothel agrees to the bargain, but shackles Eugene with the same chain she used on Rapunzel in order to prevent him from pursuing her after his injury is healed. Rapunzel rushes to Eugene’s side and examines his bloody wound. She apologizes for what she believes is her fault, as she did in the flooding tunnel many scenes ago. She promises him everything will be okay. And as we know, she always keeps her promises.

Weak from loss of blood, Eugene vainly tries to prevent Rapunzel from applying her magic hair to his wound. “I can’t let you do this!” he insists. “And I can’t let you die,” she counters. “But if you do this, you will die,” he protests, referring not to her literal death but to something perhaps worse for a young woman who has tasted freedom for the first time and now faces the grim prospect of giving it up. She would suffer a kind of living death as perpetual child to Mother Gothel’s vampire-like parent. But Rapunzel is determined, trying to pacify Eugene so she can heal his wound.

On several occasions early in their relationship, Flynn Rider deceived Rapunzel for personal gain. This time Eugene does so in order to rescue her from her own generosity. It’s the only weapon he has left, being physically too weak to stop her from applying her magic hair to his wound. The expression on his face falsely suggests he has acceded to Rapunzel’s wishes. “Rapunzel, wait,” he pleads, brushing back her hair. It’s the same gesture he used when he moved in for what was supposed to be their first kiss, aboard the gondola. We and Rapunzel assume he intends to give her that first and final kiss now, before they part forever. Instead, he summons what remains of his fading strength and employs one of the shards of glass from
Mother Gothel’s broken mirror to cut off Rapunzel’s golden hair in a single stroke. The symbol of Mother Gothel’s vanity becomes a weapon by which Eugene denies her the drug that fed that vanity, thus ending her reign of terror.

The ways in which Rapunzel’s magic hair is used throughout the movie tell a story of a moral progression. Mother Gothel exploited it for a selfish purpose, repeatedly restoring her youth at the expense of Rapunzel’s maturation and freedom. Rapunzel then used it to shackle Flynn Rider until he agreed to help her achieve *her* goal. During their subsequent journey together, she employed her hair to save both Eugene and herself from drowning. Next she healed Eugene’s injured hand with it, and in so doing willingly made herself vulnerable to him. Now she tries to save Eugene’s life with it, sacrificing her own freedom in the process. The “magic” of Rapunzel’s hair is morally defined by the intent of its users.

Like a lit fuse racing towards a lethal stick of dynamite, Rapunzel’s golden hair turns brown from the point at which it was severed all the way back to a horrified Mother Gothel, who greedily gathers it in her arms, desperately clinging to its fading promise of eternal youth. As the last of it turns brown, she turns old, withered and gray. Hundreds of years of natural aging catch up with her in a few moments. Gazing at her reflection in the shattered remnants of her mirror, she sees her hideous features fragmented and multiplied. The mirror reflects a true image of the monster she became long ago. No one can face such a terrible revelation about herself. Pulling her cap down over her eyes so she doesn’t have to see her grotesque face, she reels around the room in terror and fury.

Like the villain who is pathologically jealous of her own daughter in “Snow White,” Mother Gothel is doomed. The pride and joy she should have experienced while watching Rapunzel
grow into a mature, intelligent, independent young woman was subsumed by all-consuming envy. Pascal, moments ago hopelessly overmatched in his attempt to stop Mother Gothel from leaving with a shackled Rapunzel, now employs the surprisingly useful brown hair to trip the old woman. She stumbles through and out of the same window she opened to let in Eugene so she could kill him, plummeting to her death far below. By the time her cape strikes the ground, with a musical flourish befitting a great fairy tale villain, there is nothing left of her. She decayed from vitality to dust in a matter of moments. In the end, Mother Gothel is a mere phantom that once filled Rapunzel with dread and immobility—an imaginary monster under the bed that causes a child to hide under the covers, or in a tower, fearfully avoiding the outside world.

The loss of her magic hair is necessary for Rapunzel’s growth as a woman. It’s been both a blessing and a curse, allowing her to heal Eugene’s injured hand, yet enslaving her to Mother Gothel; rescuing her and Eugene from dangerous pursuers, yet proving a clumsy mess in the crowded village. In a bygone era when so much emphasis was placed on the moral value of a woman’s “virtue,” that magic hair might have symbolized Rapunzel’s virginity. But in Tangled it has a much broader meaning: the appeal of eternal youth, naivety and perhaps even a belief in magic. Rapunzel’s impossibly long hair is not the same, symbolically, as her royal crown. She grows out of one and into the other. Neither journey was easy. In more mundane terms, the loss of Rapunzel’s golden tresses could equate to something as simple as a teenage girl changing her hair style and color as a declaration of independence. She doesn’t want to look like mom and dad’s little girl any more. She wants to define herself.

Since Pascal is Rapunzel’s imaginary friend, and therefore an extension of herself, his dispatching of Mother Gothel may be a measure of Rapunzel’s subconscious desire to dispatch
her mother—or rather, the evil surrogate who during Rapunzel’s difficult years of growing up conveniently stands in for the real parents who anxiously wait for their beloved daughter to return home. Fairy tales render such violent resolutions to the child/parent conflict emotionally acceptable by distancing and disguising them. By getting rid of the domineering Mother Gothel, through her chameleon double, Rapunzel achieves independence. The same emotional complications surround Hiccup’s conquest of his father’s evil double, the enormous Red Death dragon, in How to Train Your Dragon, and the killing of Hiccup’s actual father by the boy’s dragon double, Toothless, in How to Train Your Dragon 2.

But if Pascal represents Rapunzel’s subconscious urge to get rid of her evil mother in this scene, on a conscious level the young woman has attained her “gentle heart,” as Joseph Campbell phrased it. As proof, she reaches out reflexively to rescue Mother Gothel as the monster falls out of the tower window. Recovering from the shock of her evil mother’s death, she returns her attention to a far more important one. Taking Eugene tenderly in her arms, Rapunzel begs him to live, denying the imminence of his death. “No no no no no, Eugene!” He coughs, barely alive. Taking his powerless right hand in hers and raising it to her powerless, close-cropped brown hair, she sings her healing song. Nothing happens.

Knowing death is near, Eugene weakly pleads for Rapunzel’s attention. He needs to tell her one last thing. “You were my new dream.” As he explained to her in the gondola, the great thing about dreams is that when one is achieved, or in his case discarded, you get to choose a new one. His original dream, of material wealth and emotional invulnerability, had not been achieved, yet he chose to replace it with a better one—Rapunzel. She replies in kind, “And you were mine.” Content, Eugene closes his eyes and dies.
Rapunzel holds Eugene’s body in her arms. The lighting in this scene renders her dream paintings on the wall in the background faded, while accentuating the ragged edges of her short, brown, powerless hair. She lets go of Eugene’s hand to caress his face. Grief-stricken, she despondently sings the song that once enabled her to heal his wounded hand. “Heal what has been hurt. Change the fates’ design. Save what has been lost. Bring back what once was mine.”

We see the characters’ faces in a big close-up. Speaking now rather than singing, because she has lost hope, Rapunzel repeats, “What once was mine.” She weeps softly, a tear dropping from her glistening eyes onto Eugene’s cheek.

The camera cuts to a high overhead shot of the tragic couple. Eugene’s body sprawls still and lifeless. Rapunzel embraces his head. Long strands of her shorn, useless brown hair lie strewn nearby. The dressing dummy, a stand-in for the absent Mother Gothel, seems to mock the parted lovers from nearby. The music stops. There’s no magic left. This powerful image could have been the last shot of the film. By anything but fairy tale logic, it is the last shot. Like Romeo and Juliet, two lovers are parted much too early by circumstances beyond their control. I could be wrong, but I think the filmmakers intended this arresting overhead image to remind us how close we all are, at any age and at any moment, to crushing disappointment and tragedy.

**Tangled** is a powerful film, partly because it dramatizes psychological and moral complications, and partly because it arouses strong emotions arising from those complications. Rapunzel’s early attempts to inject fun and creativity into her circumscribed, routine world; Flynn Rider’s wisecracking if selfish sense of adventure; Max’s grim enthusiasm for administering justice; the thugs and ruffians’ grotesquely optimistic revelation of hidden dreams; the King and Queens’ enduring sadness over losing a child; even Mother Gothel’s wickedly
gleeful sadism—all of these attitudes and emotions are beautifully explored and expressed through animated characters, dubbed voices, dynamic settings, clever camera work and vibrant music. And so it is with the tragic death of Eugene Fitzherbert and the inconsolable sorrow of Rapunzel. Yes, they're just artificial images in a wildly fanciful fairy tale. But they're also emotional and intellectual exercises. Are we, as viewers, capable of feeling with and for them? And can we transfer those feelings to real life?

Fairy tales indulge in literal magic that does not exist in real life. Eugene lies dead in Rapunzel's arms. After giving us what appears to be a conclusive overview of their tragic separation, the camera cuts back to a close-up. The teardrop on Eugene's cheek, visible proof that someone cares deeply about him years after he'd given up on any such dream ("You'd be the first," he once told Rapunzel), is absorbed into his skin, where it assumes the shape of a golden sunflower and moves off-screen, towards his wound.

In a profile shot of both characters, streaks of golden light emerge from Eugene's wound, filling the tower and illuminating Rapunzel's startled, wide-eyed face. Curling into the shapes of flower petals, the light intensifies around Eugene's injury, then disappears. The wound is healed. Indulging Rapunzel's and our desire to bring Eugene back from the dead and reunite these two lovers paradoxically accentuates the depth of their potential tragedy. What Flynn Rider described (his own death) so glibly in the film's Prolog returns with much greater dramatic potency. He's earned the right to be mourned, then celebrated when he magically returns to life.

Rapunzel gazes at Eugene's face. His eyes open weakly. "Rapunzel?" he asks. "Eugene?" she answers. Neither can quite believe their inexplicable good fortune, which we understand is the arbitrary result of the storyteller's whim. Smiling at each other, with hair now of matching color
and length, they share the same dream. Eugene immediately renews their long-delayed romance.

“Have I ever told you I’ve got a thing for brunettes?” It’s a great line, injecting his characteristic humor into what could easily become a maudlin moment. Thankfully, Eugene retains the Flynn Rider charm and wit, but now uses both to a better purpose.

In his own way, Eugene reminds us that symbolism too is an arbitrary thing. At the beginning of Tangled, the heroine’s golden hair, with its healing power, was counterpointed by Mother Gothel’s black hair, linked to her evil ways. The color brown was associated with severed and therefore powerless hair, and with the “bad man smell” and “really bad man smell” at the Snuggly Duckling. Yet throughout the story Rapunzel’s luxurious blonde hair was a mixed blessing. By cutting it off, Eugene liberates Rapunzel. And by not restoring it to her in the final, celebratory scenes, the filmmakers broaden the definition of beauty, goodness, and even magic. Rapunzel’s short, punkish brown hair is just as good as her long, blond tresses. Maybe better, because goodness was inside her all along, regardless of her hair color and length.

Overjoyed, Rapunzel passionately embraces Eugene. He sits up, now fully recovered, his face and eyes expressing an unqualified acceptance of the love she so unabashedly offers. Something he was neither inclined nor able to do before she entered his life. Rapunzel laughs and impulsively kisses him, in the manner of the inexperienced teenager she still is, in some respects. Eugene is a bit startled, then closes his eyes and answers that kiss with a more sophisticated and experienced kiss of his own. These little differences make them a more interesting couple.

At the royal palace in the village, a soldier enters the King and Queens’ private quarters and silently signals to them that what they’ve hoped and waited for the past eighteen years has finally come true. No words are needed. They race down a corridor towards a door emblazoned with
their royal emblem, hesitating before opening it, afraid to risk the possibility of another bitter
disappointment. Giving each other hope and encouragement in a difficult moment, they open the
door.

Outside the door is a balcony overlooking the ocean--the same balcony from which the King
and Queen launched the original lantern in celebration of their daughter's birth, and more
recently launched the last of eighteen annual lanterns signaling for their Lost Princess to return.
Rapunzel and Eugene stand holding hands at the far end of the balcony. If Mother Gothel played
the oppressive tyrant that nearly every child at some point sees his or her parents to be during the
difficult process of growing up, maturity brings the hopeful prospect of reconciliation. Whether
she realized it or not, that was part of Rapunzel's dream when she painted the floating lights on
the tower wall.

Rapunzel and Eugene stand looking out to sea, perhaps reminiscing about where their boat was
situated when they finally admitted their love for each other. They turn to greet the King, Queen
and us. A subjective camera places the audience in the position of parents suddenly reunited with
their long-lost child. Outside of a fairy tale, the reason for that separation could be almost
anything, from emotional estrangement to death. As an audience, we want this reunion to
happen. Fairy tales are partly about satisfying those desires.

Rapunzel cautiously approaches her parents. The Queen just as cautiously advances to meet
her, hardly daring to believe it's true. Brunette meets brunette. Traditional long hair meets a new,
shorter style. The Queen touches Rapunzel's cheek. They recognize each other in spite of the
change in Rapunzel's hair color. We can see the resemblance between them. They smile and
embrace. The King, overwhelmed with joy, embraces both wife and daughter. They kneel on the
balcony floor. We move closer to join them. Eugene briefly disappears from view. He’s been observing Rapunzel’s family reunion, clearly happy for her and her parents. But for a moment, he is the odd man out, seemingly forgotten. It’s a reunion he will never share with his own parents, long gone and never known to him.

The next shot restores Eugene to the dramatic mix. The Queen reaches out to him. To his surprise, she pulls him into the family huddle. The orphan finds a home, at last. The once unworthy commoner is warmly welcomed into this reunited royal family. For a fleeting, magical moment, Rapunzel and Eugene are children again, loved and protected by devoted parents who physically envelop them. The camera pulls up and away as this intimate family scene segues into a village-wide celebration of the Lost Princess returned.

Interestingly, it was the Queen, not the King, who reached out to Eugene and welcomed him into the family hug. There is no overt indication here that the King resents his daughter’s lover, who is now the most important male in her life. Let’s just say the King was not quite as enthusiastic in his welcome of Eugene as was the Queen. But unlike Mother Gothel, he’s wise and considerate enough to accept his loss of status in the eyes of Rapunzel.

Happily-ever-after fairy tale endings can benefit from a healthy dose of humor. Narrator Eugene sets the scene. He starts off with the word “Well,” as he’s done frequently in Tangled. Is it just a habitual quirk of speech? Or is it a self-conscious, storyteller’s pause as he ponders how to end his story. “You can imagine what happened next” places a fairy tale stamp on the proceedings. “The kingdom rejoiced, for the Lost Princess had been returned.” A bluebird, the creature Rapunzel painted on the tower walls as her private symbol of freedom, flies by as we watch the festivities from high overhead. “The party lasted an entire week. And honestly, I don’t
remember most of it.” Now that sounds like the old Flynn Rider.

Dreams come true for nearly everyone, including Hook Hand, who becomes the greatest concert pianist in the land, “if you can believe it,” adds Eugene. With that qualifying phrase the narrator reminds us again that he’s telling a rather far-fetched story in which wildly improbable wishes can come true. They do as well for Big Nose, who finds someone to love, and presumably for the eccentric Ulf, who finds an audience for his mime act.

Max returns to his original role as supreme enforcer of the law, taking strict command of the King’s soldiers, who stand before him rigidly at attention, and incorporating Rapunzel’s surprisingly effective frying pan into his arsenal. Crime disappears almost overnight, we are told. But of equal importance, Max hasn’t given up the softer side Rapunzel brought out in him. He grudgingly forgives a soldier for being late to formation when the man bribes him with an apple. To be human is to be imperfect. To be perfect is to be inhuman, and perhaps inhumane.

Even Pascal, originally Rapunzel’s imaginary friend, enjoys the benefits of community. He’s adored and pampered by the braided-hair girls, who stand on the verge of their own journeys from childhood to womanhood, and might welcome a make-believe confidante. Yet the little chameleon is still devoted to Rapunzel, to whose shoulder he returns. She no longer needs him in the way she once did, but he will always be treasured, like an adult’s fond memory of a favorite, reassuring toy, or fairy tale.

Speaking of the heroine, Eugene informs us, “At last, Rapunzel was home. And she finally had a real family. She was a Princess worth waiting for. Beloved by all, she led her kingdom with all the grace and wisdom that her parents did before her.” Or maybe more, because of what she overcame and what she learned from her difficult journey to maturity. The first time Rapunzel
visited the village, she was not quite ready to take her place at the head of it, bringing with her the wisdom (Joseph Campbell’s “treasure”) she gained during her journey.

Accepting a final hug from the King and Queen, who discretely move off-screen and disappear, Rapunzel leaves them to interact on her own with the villagers. It’s not a gesture of rejection, but rather of grown-up independence. She no longer clings to her parents for security, as she clung to Mother Gothel on several occasions when she was frightened or disappointed. Rapunzel’s greeting of what are technically her loyal subjects is more that of an equal than an aristocratic superior, much like her earlier participation in their celebratory dance, and in “I’ve Got a Dream” with the Snuggly Duckling crowd. Until Rapunzel returned to them, we never saw the King and Queen outside their royal palace, mingling with commoners. Rapunzel hugs a young girl, maybe the one who placed a flower of remembrance at the foot of the mosaic honoring the Lost Princess. She places a flower in the child’s hair, like the one Mother Gothel removed from Rapunzel’s hair back at the tower, in an effort to expunge the heroine’s memories of home and love.

The fairy tale ending in *Tangled* does not go into detail about Rapunzel replacing her parents as leader of the kingdom. Presumably the only way she could have inherited the job is through their deaths. Fairy tales are part wish-fulfillment. Sometimes that involves appreciating the good times and not dwelling on the inevitability of change, decay and loss. Besides, Rapunzel’s royal status is more metaphorical than literal. It’s her own life over which she now rules.

Narrator Eugene finally comes round to himself. “And as for me, well, I started going by ‘Eugene’ again, stopped thieving and basically turned it all around.” He no longer clings for security to his “fake reputation” as the swashbuckling Flynn Rider. Fortunately, however, like
Maximus, he doesn’t jettison all of his old identity. If Max remains a superego figure with proper balance, Eugene remains his id counterpart, retaining his roguish sense of humor and playfulness.

Rapunzel, noticing something missing from the top of her head, turns to Eugene with a wry smile and holds out her hand, knowing he’s snatched her crown. Feigning innocence for a moment, he grins and pulls it out from behind his back. Rapunzel reaches for it, but he playfully holds it just out of her reach. Pretending to be the thief he once was, he toys with her for their mutual amusement. Never a shrinking violet, and not about to give up the independence she’s gained, Rapunzel grabs him by the collar and pulls him down into a classic romantic pose, but with her in the dominant position. She smiles, rolling her eyes at Eugene’s prank. Boys will be boys. Then she plants a big kiss on his lips, which perhaps was the goal of his prank in the first place. Only then does Eugene return the crown to Rapunzel’s brown-haired head, happy to accept her bribe. Clearly she’s not going to play second fiddle to a man—not even this man. Nor does he really want her to. They’re going to have a great deal of fun together, underscored by the knowledge that they were willing to sacrifice everything for each other.

In a greater sense, Eugene Fitzherbert acquires the castle, embodied by the crown he filches from Rapunzel, that Flynn Rider once coveted. But because he has matured and swapped his old dream for a better one, the prize he seeks is much greater. And the same applies to Rapunzel, who got to see the floating lights in person, then reunited with her real parents, and finally moved on to a better dream—the man who guided her to those previous dreams.

“But I know what the BIG question is,” the narrator remarks. “Did Rapunzel and I ever get married? Well, I’m pleased to tell you that after years of asking and asking and asking ... I
finally said ‘yes.’” This is the last example of the film contradicting our expectations. From a physical posture of subordination, held in Rapunzel’s arms while they kiss, Eugene seems to regain the upper hand in their relationship. But only until Rapunzel joins him as off-screen co-narrator and gently prods him to tell the truth. “All right,” he confesses, “I asked her.” And he’s not disappointed at all to admit it. Complications are reduced to a playful game of make-believe. Everything is subordinate to love and friendship at the end of Tangled.

If ever a sequel to Tangled were produced, what sort of complications might our hero and heroine encounter. The challenges of raising children who must go through the same difficult process of growing up as did they? Or maybe they’d disagree over how to raise those children, especially since their own experiences of childhood were so different from one another. Would Rapunzel be too indulgent because she was raised by a domineering mother? Would Eugene be overprotective because he grew up lacking parental care? Or would they repeat their own experiences with their children? But that’s all speculation. Tangled is a story about achieving maturity and happiness, not about passing it on to the next generation. Leave that for another day, and another story.

Rapunzel concludes with a variation on the traditional fairy tale ending, “And we’re living happily ever after.” Not “lived,” but “living.” This happy ending has no limits. Paradise forever? Eugene concurs with deep conviction and contentment in his voice: “Yes, we are.” Floating lanterns fill the sky over the kingdom. Some of them hold up Shorty, still dressed as an unlikely Cupid, complete with bow and arrow, blowing us a boozy farewell kiss. It’s a bizarre image merging the extremes of youth and old age, both subjects of this movie. Tangled is about dreams coming true for imperfect people.
Everything is wrapped up in a tidy, golden package at the end of *Tangled*. Wish fulfillment is indulged to the maximum. Yet the movie contains an interesting framing device that places its audience at a slight distance from all that unmitigated happiness. In the film’s Prolog, Flynn Rider’s off-screen voice introduces us to the tale we are about to see. Solemnly informing us, “This is the story of how I died,” his voice then brightens and revises the course of events to come. It’s a *fun* story, less about him than about a girl named Rapunzel. The capriciousness of storytelling is made clear to us from the start. An author can push and pull us any way he wishes, to please whatever private whim, need or purpose he has.

Midway through the movie, Eugene reveals to Rapunzel that as an orphan he used to read a favorite adventure story every night to the younger children, then tried to *live* that story himself, albeit with some concessions to reality. He turned thief in order to attain the wealth to which his fictional counterpart was born. Later, after falling in love with Rapunzel, he tells her that the end of one dream simply means you can choose a new one. Daydreams are like stories, especially fairy tales, in which we can select the ending we want. At the end of *Tangled*, Eugene the narrator returns to supply an Epilog in which he gets the girl, after both make the ultimate sacrifice to rescue each other, gives up his life of crime, yet retains his roguish charm, and “lives happily ever after” with lots of friends and a castle he can call home. It’s not difficult to envision orphaned Eugene Fitzherbert inventing the entire story of *Tangled* in order to satisfy, at least for a while, his frustrated yearnings—to keep hope alive rather than be overwhelmed by despair. Nor is it difficult to imagine a deceived, imprisoned and exploited child like Rapunzel daydreaming of better things and painting them on the walls of her prison. Fairy tales like *Tangled* and the *Dragon* movies express in vivid, colorful terms our yearning for a better life. Sometimes that
yearning goes wrong, as when Flynn Rider perverted fictional adventures into a life of self-indulgence, thievery and emotional isolation. But in the end, as narrator, he wrote himself out of a lonely tragedy and into a triumphant comedy, with a beautiful, willful young woman as his rescuer, and he as hers. In the end, when Rapunzel joins Eugene as narrator, they both become the inventors of their own stories, with many addendums yet to be written.

*Tangled* is filled with dramatic conflicts and complications, acknowledging the confusion and volatility of life. It’s emotionally sound and richly detailed. Yet it simultaneously indulges our taste for wildly exaggerated adventure, a hard-fought victory of good over evil, the achievements of love and friendship, and a “happily ever after” that never grows stale and never dies. Mother Gothel, though a dastardly villain with no redeeming value other than a twisted enthusiasm for cruelty and manipulation, is a haunting reminder that we all grow old, lose our looks, lose our physical and mental powers, lose friends and lovers we might have acquired along the way, and inevitably die. She is the nightmare we must all face, hopefully with more grace and compassion for others than she exhibited. Rapunzel and Eugene, on the other hand, are the happy ending, following a period of great peril and desperate struggle, that we all want for ourselves. That magical blend of youth, beauty, humor, enthusiasm, good will, integrity and love should live forever in all of us, but is too often extinguished or perverted into something far less attractive. “And we’re living happily ever after,” says Rapunzel. “Yes, we are,” concurs Eugene, even if it’s just at the end of an extraordinary movie.

During the film’s closing credits we are treated to a short, alternate version of *Tangled*, drawn in still-life cartoon images very different from the animation we just saw. Like Eugène’s brief Prolog and Epilog, they remind us that stories, even the same story, can be told in many different
forms. Some of the images in this final montage suggest episodes not shown in the animated version: Rapunzel dangling Flynn, tied to a chair, out the tower window, and a bear chasing Flynn through the woods. In other words, we’re free to invent our own variation on the story of Rapunzel, or any other story that captures our imagination.

Accompanying the closing credits is the film’s final song. “Something That I Want” is all about yearning, returning us to Rapunzel and Flynn as they were at the beginning of the story. She’s “a girl with the best intentions” who needs “something” and “everything,” but can’t quite define what that is. He’s “a man of his own invention,” “living in a pure illusion” until “Someone comes along and shows [him] a brand new way.” The song is musical shorthand for their amazing journey of discovery together.
In John Huston’s 1962 movie *Freud*, Sigmund Freud’s mentor advises the young psychiatrist, “Go to the heart of our darkness. Hunt out the dragon.” A 2015 PBS documentary entitled *Uranium: Twisting the Dragon’s Tail* taps into the same metaphor. Like wolves, witches and giants, dragons are objects of both fear and fascination. We seem powerless in their clutches, powerful when we defeat them.

As a kid in the early 1960’s I was fond of the Peter, Paul and Mary song “Puff, the Magic Dragon.” A miniature musical fairy tale, it tells the story of a friendship between a little boy named Jackie Paper and a mighty dragon named Puff. Drug allusions aside (I wasn’t aware of them in 1963), “Puff” is a beautiful piece of safe, stylized wish-fulfillment for any child facing a big new world of confusing, scary unknowns. Perched on the gigantic tail of the rascally reptile, Jackie travels the world having great adventures. Thanks to Puff’s mighty roar, he’s treated with deference by powerful adults, including parental figures (kings and princes) and menacing strangers (pirates). What child wouldn’t want a friend like that by his side? The
first novel I ever read was Evelyn Sibley Lampman’s *The Shy Stegosaurus*, about a dinosaur who helps two kids battle a bank robber.

King Kong and Godzilla could do the job of intimidating adults. But they’re unlikely playmates, much less trusted friends. Puff is a gentle dragon with a mighty roar—the perfect combination of congeniality and strength, confidante and protector. I have no idea if the creators of *How to Train Your Dragon* and its sequel ever heard of Puff. Regardless, the song’s imaginary buddies are precursors to Hiccup, the undersized, disrespected Viking, and Toothless, the one-of-a-kind dragon Hiccup befriends.

Like *Tangled*, released to theatres the same year, *How to Train Your Dragon* features a teenage hero who overcomes great odds to prove his worth and liberate himself from a form of imprisonment. It’s a boy instead of a girl this time out, but the character arcs are similar. However, Hiccup’s situation seems in many ways the opposite of Rapunzel’s at the beginning of their respective stories. She lives in a tower, isolated from everyone except her mother, who isn’t even her *real* mother. Hiccup, on the other hand, is a member of a very tight-knit tribe of Vikings, living in the bustling mountain village of Berk. The adult residents of that village, including Hiccup’s father, the village chief, would all give their lives for their children. Mother Gothel’s relationship with Rapunzel is purely parasitic. Any parental protection she offers is selfishly motivated.

Nevertheless, both Hiccup and Rapunzel find themselves desperately alone. Rapunzel needs to expand her horizons, see the world outside her tower and meet other people. Hiccup, the undersized underachiever, needs to participate in the Viking’s communal war against marauding dragons and make a reputation for himself. Before his heroic journey begins, he gets no respect
from his fellow Vikings, including his teenage peers and, most importantly, his gigantic, legendary, dragon-fighting father. A deep, abiding sense of desolation inspires both Hiccup and Rapunzel to commence heroic journeys into the unknown. For Hiccup, the village of Berk is as much a prison as the tower is for the heroine of *Tangled*.

Rapunzel and Hiccup are both accompanied by initially reluctant companions on their respective journeys: companions who start out embodying their worst fears but end up becoming their best friends. Flynn Rider, who transforms into the more mature Eugene Fitzherbert, and a dragon named Toothless share in the dangers and rewards of the main characters’ perilous expeditions of self-discovery. Fear and ignorance must be overcome before Hiccup and Rapunzel can attain maturity. The word “maturity” sounds so stuffy and passionless. But consider the immature *adults* in these two films, a few of whom have passed the point in their lives when they’re capable of change.

Hiccup, our hero, is not “ugly” in the conventional sense. But by the standards of his Viking tribe he is scrawny, physically weak and prone to blunders. In fact he’s the village joke. And as such, the most appropriate fairy tale analogy I can think of is Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Ugly Duckling,” whose hero is a swan mistakenly born into a family of ducks. Unlike Hiccup, he is too big rather than too small. Yet he too suffers contempt and abuse, until he and the world around him discover what he really is.

As the mother duck in Anderson’s tale explains to her offspring, the world is a place of struggle for survival. So too is the village of Berk, Hiccup’s cold, rugged, often dangerous home. To make matters worse, both Hiccup and the Ugly Duckling experience rejection by the parent who should protect them from the world’s cruelty. “You don’t understand me” is a complaint
both misfits express in one form or another.

The analogy between “The Ugly Duckling” and *How to Train Your Dragon* is not ironclad. Analogies seldom are. Anderson’s hero gets respect simply by growing into what he was destined to become. Hiccup must *earn* his credentials, and does so, ironically, by defying core tenets of Viking tradition and forging a new way of perceiving and behaving in the world. The Ugly Duckling leaves the disappointing home into which he was born in order to explore the world at large, eventually finding happiness and self-respect among his own kind. Hiccup too ranges outside the village of Berk in search of his better self elsewhere. Both heroes better appreciate the happiness they find by having suffered hardship first. Yet suffering is no guarantee of progress. In *How to Train Your Dragon 2* we’ll meet a character who, unlike Hiccup, was irreversibly twisted and perverted by *his* perilous journey.

*Hot to Train Your Dragon* is Hiccup’s fairy tale. His narration begins and concludes it. During the course of it he magically gets to defy his father, earn his father’s respect, defeat and befriend the ultimate dragon foe, gain the admiration of his once contemptuous teenage peers and impress the girl who once barely acknowledged his existence. Of course these rewards require Hiccup to endure severe tests of his courage and wisdom, suffer ignominious defeats and survive crushing self-doubts. Ultimately, training his dragon refers more to mastering his own life than subduing an external enemy.

As the Dreamworks logo appears on screen to start the movie, a mysterious black silhouette swiftly, almost invisibly, flies across the starry background. Like a giant vampire bat, it’s a fleeting preview of the mysterious beast our hero must soon confront: his first heroic test along
the road to adulthood. The less Vikings know about that dragon, the more of a mythical monster they are inclined to make of it.

Like Rapunzel, Hiccup grows up in an unspecified, timeless, colorful past any audience can make his or her own. Like Flynn Rider, the Viking teenager supplies narration at the beginning and end of the story. As an outcast, for reasons we have yet to discover, his narrative persona possesses a somewhat detached, sardonic overview of his home and culture. And again like Rider, Hiccup employs humor to fend off disappointment and fear.

Our tour of Berk starts from a distance. Ironically, we first approach the village through the eyes of its mortal enemy, without at first realizing it. Perched on the side of a mountain, Berk leads a precarious existence. Rough winds pound at its base, throwing up ocean spray into our faces as we, by way of a subjective camera, approach the village. Unlike Rapunzel’s tower, Berk offers little security to its residents. And it’s a far cry from the tranquil seaside village from which Rapunzel was kidnapped as an infant.

In the thin, reedy, non-traditionally heroic yet very expressive voice of Jay Baruchel, Hiccup sarcastically pinpoints his native village “twelve days north of hopeless and a few degrees south of freezing to death … solidly on the meridian of misery.” “Meridian?” He sounds like a smart kid, well in advance of his era. Remember Rapunzel’s scientific study of star movements, which led her to question Mother Gothel’s lie about the floating lights, and to eventually leave home in pursuit of them.

Hiccup describes his village as “sturdy” and old, yet with new buildings throughout. Maybe it’s not such a bad place after all. Maybe the narrator was kidding about hopelessness and misery, though it certainly appears cold. “Fishing, hunting and a charming view of the sunsets,”
he adds, sounding like a tourist promotion. Until he introduces Berk’s “pests,” one of which
snatches up a grazing sheep so quickly that we don’t get a clear look at the predator. Other places
have to deal with mice and mosquitoes, but “we have …”

The narrator set us up. From inside the warmth and comfort of a Viking house, we and Hiccup
open the front door and see one of a horde of fire-breathing dragons attacking the village. Our
hero is a short, scrawny, fur-vested young Viking whose casual off-screen narration is now
belied by his passionate, on-screen expression of terror. “Dragons!” the boy informs us,
slamming shut the heavy door just in time to escape a blast of fiery death spewed in his direction
by one of the “pests.”

Hiccup also has a small scar on his chin—a subtle token of less visible, emotional scars he’s
accumulated thus far in his young life, and a harbinger of a much more significant scar to come.
It’s a nice visual touch, explained further in How to Train Your Dragon 2. Combined with a few
facial blemishes that come naturally from being a teenager and from growing up in a harsh
climate, the scar adds to our overall impression of an embattled teenager.

Back to the calm, cool, sarcastic narration. While we witness violent contests between
courageous adult Vikings and fire-breathing, airborne dragons, an off-screen Hiccup describes
the action with detached humor, “Most people would leave. Not us. We’re Vikings. We have
stubbornness issues.” He thereby implies they should relocate to more congenial territory. But
Hiccup is at least as stubborn as any other Viking we encounter in this movie. So the narrator’s
comment is really a compliment disguised as a criticism, the latter satisfying Hiccup’s need to
retaliate against villagers who, we eventually discover, have humiliated him.

Hiccup the narrator does not entirely embrace the traditional perceptions of his tribe. But
Hiccup the boy on screen *does* embrace the traditional Viking enmity towards dragons. Emerging from the relative safety of his house, he grins at the action he sees all around him, which he believes affords him an opportunity to improve his social status in the village. He wants very much to be part of the collective effort to defend Berk, even though he runs afoul of numerous adult Vikings engaged in the battle. Dodging this way and that, he manages to avoid disaster yet is the cause of annoyance to others. One of the adults is distracted when he spots the boy, whose presence he regards with obvious disapproval, and accidently gets conked on the head from a log carried by two other adults. The same log Hiccup passed safely under moments earlier. There are some advantages to being little. Not many, but some. Unfortunately they are not advantages that serve the needs of his tribe.

Hiccup is quickly established as the village nuisance, getting in nearly everyone else’s way as he tries to contribute to their communal effort. The narrator informs us that Viking parents sometimes give their weaker children “hideous names” to ward off supernatural threats. Hence his own insulting name of Hiccup. “Like our charming Viking demeanor wouldn’t do that,” he adds, taking verbal revenge on all Viking parents, including his own, who would inflict such a burden on their children. After all, “Hiccup” refers to an insignificant, slightly embarrassing physiological phenomenon. It’s about as far from “Thor” and “Odin” as you can get, and certainly doesn’t translate into “dragon fighter.” It’s just another name for “loser,” which has defined our hero since birth.

Hiccup deftly weaves his way through the chaos of battle. Several adults yell at him to return indoors. He’s not wanted here. But he ignores them, pursuing *his* dream of participating in the defense of Berk, until a huge, brawny arm reaches out to snatch his little body out of harm’s
way. “What is he doin’ out again?!” confirms our suspicion that Hiccup is a habitual, not a one-time, nuisance during dragon attacks. Hiccup’s much bigger rescuer shoves the boy back in the direction of home, with orders to “Get inside!” The narrator introduces this new character as Stoick the Vast, the village Chief, whose grim facial expression is a much better match than Hiccup’s for the grimacing wooden gargoyle sculptures visible throughout the village. Artistic images that personify the spirit of Viking toughness.

Viking grit and power personified, Stoick is a legend in his own time. He’s famous, according to the narrator, for ripping the head off a dragon when he was a mere boy--a feat Hiccup cannot possibly duplicate at a similar age. And Hiccup believes the legend, making him feel even smaller and more inadequate by comparison. We’re inclined to believe it as well after seeing Stoick effortlessly launch a large wagon into the air, hitting and stunning a flying dragon. The very name “Stoick” suggests resoluteness in the face of adversity, but also perhaps a stubborn, inflexible point of view. At least his parents didn’t give him a “hideous” name like Hiccup. They probably didn’t think he needed one.

Stoick receives a battle report from one of his lieutenants, identifying the attacking dragons by species. As Chief, he determines battle tactics based on such information, and is very good at it. A nearby explosion causes his subordinate to take cover behind a shield. Stoick, by contrast, doesn’t even flinch, casually brushing aside a flaming ember that lands on his broad shoulders. His vast, stout, upright figure stands out boldly against the fire-illuminated night sky.

Instead of returning home, as ordered, stubborn Hiccup goes to the village blacksmith shop where he serves as apprentice to a man named Gobber, an old warrior nearly as big as Stoick and missing an arm and a leg as proof of his valor in dragon battles long past. Here Hiccup does what
he can to assist the frontline troops he is forbidden to join, repairing and replacing broken
weapons of metal and wood.

Hiccup and Gobber have an interesting relationship, exchanging sarcastic banter that often
touches on the boy’s deepest insecurities. Their humor matches the narrator’s. Did Hiccup
acquire his sense of humor from the older man? Or do they share it by coincidence? Could
Gobber, in his youth, have become the kind of revolutionary hero Hiccup eventually will be? But
Gobber is mostly a man of conventional outlook, heavily invested in Viking tradition, with just
enough detachment to occasionally question some of it. For that reason, and also because the boy
has spent several years as Gobber’s apprentice, the blacksmith seems more of a father figure to
Hiccup than does the teenager’s real father, as we shall see. There is an ease about their
interaction, even when they’re at odds, that is not present when Hiccup converses with his dad,
or any other adult.

Gobber jokes that he thought Hiccup had been carried away by a dragon—a not too subtle
reference to the boy’s small size. Hiccup fires back that he’s far too “muscular” for a dragon’s
taste. “They wouldn’t know what to do with all … this,” he adds, gesturing towards his puny
body and flexing his invisible bicep. It’s basic emotional survival for Hiccup, compensating for
feelings of inadequacy by making fun of his shortcomings. Struggling to lift the heavy metal
head of a warrior’s club, he proves the point of his sarcasm. Gobber adds injury to the boy’s
disguised insult by noting, “They need toothpicks, don’t they?” But he’s not really trying to
make Hiccup feel worse about himself. He’s simply abetting Hiccup’s effort to shield himself
with humor. Narrator Hiccup retaliates in kind for his on-screen self, describing Gobber as a
“meathead” with “interchangeable hands,” in one breath calling his mentor stupid and making
fun of his disability. Viking culture, as depicted in this fairy tale, is not politically correct.

Hiccup is really extending the old man a backhanded compliment, in the way close, trusted friends often do. As alienated as he feels in the village of Berk, Hiccup is not entirely alone, thanks to one grizzled, hobbling old veteran of the dragon wars. A veteran who, perhaps because he doesn’t bear Stoick’s heavy burden of responsibility as Berk’s Chief, can afford to be a little more flexible in his outlook.

Strapping on his apron, Hiccup smoothly transits from failed warrior to competent apprentice. He and Gobber make a good team, efficiently mending and replacing damaged implements of war. The narrator explains, “I’ve been his apprentice since I was little,” then adds, “Well, littler,” as he struggles to fan the blacksmith’s fire with his lightweight body. It’s a painful admission, despite his joking manner.

We return to the adult responsibilities of Stoick on the battlefield. Barking out orders and wielding an immense hammer one could imagine belonging to Thor, he rallies the village defenders while the narrator comments humorously on the reason for all the new buildings he spoke about earlier. Dragons torch one of the new houses. No, Berk is not in the midst of a growth spurt, as one might have surmised from the narrator’s earlier comments. New construction is merely to replace the destruction of older buildings caused by dragons. One less page for the tourist brochure.

Hiccup watches from the blacksmith shop as a group of fellow teenagers plays a more active if still subordinate role in the battle, putting out fires with buckets of water. The narrator introduces them: a big boy named Fishlegs, squat and muscular Snotlout, perpetually squabbling Twins named Ruffnut and Tuffnut, and finally a trim yet strong and beautiful young woman named
Astrid. The otherwise emotionally detached narrator cannot even say her name, a combination of heavenly “astral” and Nordic “Ingrid” (nothing “hideous” about that—guess her parents had no fear for her fate in the world), without succumbing to on-screen Hiccup’s obvious infatuation.

As seen from Hiccup’s point of view, Astrid easily puts out one small fire, then turns and nonchalantly walks towards us in slow-motion splendor supplied by our hero’s awestruck mind. She is oblivious to a massive blast of dragon fire behind her as she saunters confidently, even arrogantly, in our direction. In a reaction shot, while the music swells with passion and glory, Hiccup’s wide-eyed, open-mouthed, slightly blemished, fire-illuminated face tells us all we need to know about his feelings for her. She is his impossible romantic dream, not only young and beautiful, but already an accomplished warrior-in-training, which he clearly is not.

Astrid is joined by her fellow teens in the water brigade. Dramatically framed by fire, they appear to exiled Hiccup’s perspective like a team of young superheroes, led by their incomparable Queen, all firmly fixed in the Viking firmament of glory and honor. “Their job is so much cooler,” Hiccup complains as he leans out the shop window to watch them approach, then shyly pulls back as they pass by. As if that weren’t humiliating enough, Gobber’s huge hook-hand, like Stoick’s hand earlier, reaches in from off-screen, effortlessly hoists the boy off his feet and pulls him back to his unglamorous duties. Everyone in Hiccup’s world seems so much bigger and/or more competent than is he.

Sounding very much the disgruntled teenager, Hiccup whines to be let out to join the battle. “I need to make my mark,” he pleads. Gobber, poking the boy’s narrow chest with his artificial hand (a badge of the same glory Hiccup seeks), re-defines that “mark” as one of incompetence, insisting that Hiccup has already made it. Perhaps the blacksmith’s true concern is for the boy’s
safety, not the welfare of the community. But Hiccup doesn’t give up easily. “Five minutes, please. I’ll kill a dragon. My life will get better. I might even get a date.” Defense of the village and proving his worth as a Viking are tied up in his teenage mind with his equally passionate quest for a girlfriend—ideally the unattainable Astrid. Hiccup’s dreams are much bigger than he is. And like most kids, he’s in a hurry to make them come true.

Gobber ticks off the logical reasons why Hiccup is unqualified to fight dragons. He means well, but each of those reasons is a stab at the boy’s pride. And it doesn’t help that one of the fighting skills Gobber insists Hiccup lacks is efficiently demonstrated, a moment later, by an adult Viking who uses a weapon called a mangler to bring down a dragon.

Hiccup is a smart kid, applying his experience as an apprentice blacksmith to the personal goal of earning respect as a warrior. He’s designed and built a catapult capable of launching the same mangler adult warriors launch by hand. Technological innovation compensates for the brawn he lacks. But when Hiccup touches his brand new, untested pride and joy, he accidentally triggers it, sending its potent cargo hurtling past Gobber, out a window and into the armored chest of a startled warrior. Like the Viking who got conked in the head while scolding Hiccup earlier, perhaps this is a bit of unconscious revenge for Hiccup on the adults who undervalue him. But on a conscious level, Hiccup wants only to join their ranks, not overthrow them. Misfiring his new weapon does his cause no good.

The catapult fiasco confirms Gobber’s opinion that Hiccup is leaving the wrong mark in the world. “If you want to be out there fighting dragons, you need to stop all … this,” Gobber declares, gesturing at Hiccup. “But you just pointed to all of me,” protests the boy. In other words, Hiccup would have to become someone else entirely in order to win Gobber’s and Berk’s
approval. It cannot be done. Unsympathetic, the blacksmith reiterates, "Yes, that’s it. Stop being all of you.” He doesn’t realize he’s asking the impossible. This is one of those critical moments in the story that collectively convince Hiccup he must act alone and by radical means to improve his situation, because no one else believes he can do so in conventional terms. Gobber’s kindly meant insults, like Mother Gothel’s more deliberately cruel, self-serving insults to Rapunzel, motivate the hero to take action in defiance of them.

Frustrated, Hiccup raises his shield of humor to protect himself and from a world in which few things go his way. He issues a mock warning. “You, sir, are playing a dangerous game. Keeping this much raw Vikingness contained. There’ll be consequences!” He’s mocking himself more than Gobber, because he knows he lacks that “raw Vikingness” that so many other Berkians possess. What he doesn’t know is that there really will be serious consequences resulting from his stubborn efforts to succeed at something vitally important to him. Nor does he realize how unconventional those consequences will be.

Unimpressed, Gobber dismisses Hiccup’s warning and hands the boy his next, uninspiring assignment. “Sword. Sharpen. Now.” Brief and to the point. All debate ends. Adult authority is reasserted. Hefting the large blade, nearly as tall as he is, Hiccup obediently grinds it on a stone wheel to sharpen its edge, meanwhile pacifying himself with the promise that “One day I’ll get out there. Because killing a dragon is everything around here.” And just as there is a social hierarchy among Vikings, so too there is among dragons, determining how much glory killing one will accrue. A Nadder will get you noticed. A Gronkle might earn you a girlfriend. And only the “best Vikings” dare tackle a Nightmare. We see examples of the destruction each of these dragons is capable of inflicting on Berk while the narrator describes their value to Viking pride.
Stoick, naturally, proves himself the “best” Viking by fearlessly deflecting a Nightmare’s attack.

“But the ultimate prize is the dragon no one’s ever seen. We call it the …” Hiccup hears the unholy scream of that ultimate foe from inside his prison of shame. Outside, a terrified Viking warrior finishes the boy’s line, calling out a warning of “Night Fury!” to other villagers just as a mysterious blast of plasma energy pulverizes a Viking defense tower. The narrator supplies us with more information about the ultimate prize. It never steals food, never shows itself and never misses its target. That’s the dragon Hiccup sets his sights on to make his mark in the Viking world.

His opportunity comes when Gobber, recognizing the desperate situation his comrades face outside, leaves the blacksmith shop and joins the battle. Quickly switching his artificial hand from a tool to a battleaxe, he orders Hiccup in no uncertain terms to remain behind while he hobbles outside with a Viking war cry on his lips. The old veteran embodies courage, self-sacrifice and honor, all in one package. It’s too much for Hiccup to passively witness.

Disobeying his mentor’s orders, Hiccup pushes his wheeled catapult through a crowd of warriors, scarcely noticed this time by his distracted elders, to a remote hill overlooking the sea, where he’s less likely to be observed or stopped. Meanwhile, Stoick efficiently corrals a group of deadly Nadders preying on some of the village sheep.

Surprisingly, Hiccup matches Stoick’s efficiency. Rapidly setting up, loading and aiming his innovative weapon, he waits eagerly for “something to shoot at.” It’s the wish of many adolescent boys hoping to earn respect as an adult. The sound of a Night Fury’s hissing screech, followed by a brief glimpse of it as it destroys another Viking defensive platform, gives Hiccup his opportunity. The mangler is launched. The catapult’s recoil knocks Hiccup off his feet, but
the weapon hits its mark, presumably allowing Hiccup to make his. The wounded, screaming Night Fury disappears over the horizon, plunging towards a distant mountain. Whether due to extraordinary good luck or technological savvy, the premier of Hiccup’s new weapon is a raging success.

Hiccup celebrates his victory, as do we because we know nothing about his victim. But the precaution he took to conceal his forbidden activity from Stoick and Gobber also means his unlikely success wasn’t seen and probably won’t be believed by other Vikings. It’s a Catch-22. Worse yet, Hiccup’s private celebration is noticed by a Nightmare, the second most dangerous dragon species, who smashes the boy’s catapult to bits and threatens even worse to its creator. A dejected Hiccup is not surprised at this sour turn of events. He’s accustomed to snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Hiccup is not Stoick, who earlier beat back a flaming Nightmare with his mighty hammer. The Chief spots the small boy fleeing the giant dragon along a hilltop above the village. He reluctantly abandons his own dragon battle to run to the rescue. Whatever flaws he exhibits in later scenes, he takes his responsibilities as tribal protector very seriously.

Though surprisingly adept at eluding his monstrous pursuer, probably from experience avoiding larger, stronger foes all his young life, Hiccup is eventually cornered by the Nightmare while trying to hide behind a large pole holding up a bowl of fire the Vikings employ to illuminate their flying enemies. Clearly the boy would die in this first scene if Stoick didn’t arrive in the nick of time and, at great risk to himself, drive away the dragon. Luckily, the Nightmare has run out of fuel for his flame. Stoick uses his fists and feet to beat the beast into retreat.
Burnt to a crisp by dragon flame, the pole snaps and the bowl of fire collapses to the ground, rolling downhill, creating havoc among the Viking defenders below, and releasing the dragons Stoick had moments earlier captured with a net. Hiccup winces with increasing embarrassment and shame as he and Stoick watch the disaster unfold. The boy’s wonderful facial expressions are some of the best things in the movie. Each off-screen calamity registers on Hiccup’s face. “Sorry, Dad,” he says to Stoick, revealing to us for the first time that the greatest of Viking warriors is also father of the Berk’s biggest screw-up, which only exacerbates the teenager’s shame and frustration.

The battle is over. Vikings watch helplessly as dragons fly away with much of their livestock. A different battle rages on. “Okay, but I hit a Night Fury” Hiccup claims, trying to make up for the disaster he caused. Stoick’s enormous arm once again reaches in from outside the camera frame and snatches the hapless teenager away, in front of a group of staring villagers. It’s a gauntlet of shame as Hiccup is hauled through the crowd, humiliating both himself and his father. He tries to offset that shame by repeating his claim to have brought down a Night Fury. But when he adds, “It’s not like the last few times, Dad. I mean I really, actually hit it,” we realize he’s made phony claims in the past. Desperate to prove his worth in traditional Viking terms, he previously fibbed about conquering the unconquerable Night Fury, which is understandable but certainly not a sign of maturity. He’s Chicken Little crowing about victory instead of disaster.

Putting a stop to what he assumes is another of his son’s tall tales, Stoick tries to instill in him an adult sense of responsibility. “Every time you step outside, disaster falls. Can you not see I have bigger problems? Winter is almost here and I have an entire village to feed.” Parental
concern clashes with communal obligation. But to a boy can there be anything more important than earning the respect of his father?

Stoick and all the other adults in Berk speak, perhaps inexplicably yet to great dramatic and comic effect, with a Scottish accent. Hiccup and his fellow teenagers speak American English. If nothing else, this peculiar discrepancy marks a clear distinction between generations. The Old World adults are thoroughly steeped in Viking tradition and perceptions. The not yet indoctrinated teens speak a different language, or the same language differently.

As off-screen narrator, Hiccup made some perceptively biting observations about Viking culture and his home village. But as a member of the tribe, his on-screen persona chooses a terrible time to renew that sarcasm. "Between you and me, the village could do with a little less feeding, don’t you think?" A group of stout villagers, some self-consciously rubbing their prominent bellies, lends credence to his point. But under the circumstances it’s an ill-timed jest. A jest perhaps motivated in part by Hiccup’s embarrassment about own scrawny body, which does not live up to the Viking ideal. If you can’t join them, make fun of them. It’s also an indirect jibe at his hulking father. But in the wake of losing so many badly needed food reserves to the dragons, Stoick doesn’t appreciate Hiccup’s attempt at humor. And he’s right not to, despite being wrong about his son in other respects.

Finally Hiccup pleads innocent based on his Viking instinct to kill dragons. “It’s who I am, dad.” No, it’s who he wants to be but obviously is not, as Stoick bluntly points out. Another adult warrior, visible in the background, rolls his eyes with contempt, silently voicing the village’s collective disdain for Hiccup’s claim. The boy averts his eyes, tightens his lips and hangs his head in shame while being ordered back to his father’s house. It’s a virtual prison sentence.
Gobber’s scolding slap on the back of his head doesn’t help, nor does Stoick’s announcement, “I have his mess to clean up.” Hiccup takes the walk of shame back home, past his more competent and respected teenage peers. Two of them verbally berate him and two others smile in agreement—a cruelty not uncommon among adolescents. Making fun of others can increase one’s own self-esteem, as long as you can’t or won’t imagine yourself in the victim’s shoes. Interestingly, however, one of Hiccup’s fellow teens does not contribute to his humiliation. Astrid glances at the target of Snotlout’s cruel humor but refuses to join in. She displays no sympathy for Hiccup, but is less inclined to take immature advantage of his failure. As for Hiccup himself, he tries to mask his pain with his usual humor. “Thank you. Thank you. I was trying.” Somewhat sympathetic to Hiccup, Gobber gives Snotlout a shove to the head. He knows the brawny teen’s humor is both cruel and immature. Not like the comic banter Gobber himself exchanged with Hiccup back at the blacksmith’s shop.

Nearing his father’s house, perched at the top of a hill and somewhat apart from the rest of the village, symbolic of Stoick’s rank as village Chief but also of Hiccup’s social exile, Hiccup tries to justify himself to Gobber, his only friend. He insists he really did shoot down a dragon and complains that his father never listens to him. In the distance a visually spectacular dawn breaks over another unspectacular day of disappointment for our hero. Hiccup describes his father as stubborn. “Runs in the family,” adds Gobber, pointing out a truth to the boy who mistakenly thinks he has nothing in common with Stoick.

Angry about his recent public humiliation, Hiccup savagely mocks his father, imitating Stoick’s strong accent as the Chief complains to an imaginary waitress who has brought him the wrong offspring, as though a child were nothing more than something one ordered from a menu.
It’s a very funny bit. The boy could be a comedian, which wouldn’t be the first time someone overcame a frustrating childhood by pursuing such a career. By imitating the Scottish accent of all adult Vikings in an unflattering manner, Hiccup makes us even more aware of the language discrepancy between teenagers and adults in this movie.

Gobber tries to play the role of mediator between father and son. “It’s not so much what you look like. It’s what’s inside.” What a botched effort! No different than gesturing to “all of me” and telling Hiccup to stop being himself. Pausing in disbelief at what he just heard, Hiccup once again deploys his shield of sarcasm. “Thank you for summing that up,” he scolds his mentor for failing miserably to comfort the boy. So Gobber makes a second effort. “Stop trying so hard to be something you’re not.” It’s kindly meant, and certainly better than advising him to stop being himself. But Gobber fails again to address Hiccup’s burning desire to fit in. Dropping his usual sarcasm and heading inside the house to end this unsatisfying debate, Hiccup informs Gobber with understated anguish in his voice, “I just want to be one of you guys.” It’s a more direct, heartfelt expression of pain and yearning than anything else we’ve heard from him, equivalent to the half-scolding/half pleading expression in Rapunzel’s eyes as she glances up at us, who occupy the position of parent, at the end of her song, “When Will My Life Begin?”

Gobber sighs with disappointment at his failure to comfort Hiccup. He may be Hiccup’s mentor in the blacksmith shop, but Hiccup will have to figure things out for himself, as Rapunzel did, with occasional help from Eugene and Pascal, in Tangled. At the back end of the Chief’s house, Hiccup sneaks out the door, defying both his mentor and his father. There’s nothing in that house or in Berk to make him feel good about himself, so he searches elsewhere. This is his voluntary step over the threshold and into adventure, like Rapunzel’s departure from the
Later, inside Meade Hall, Berk's huge communal gathering place, Stoick addresses the entire adult population. The hall is enormous. Its decorative wood carvings and the oval table occupying its center convey the weight of Viking tradition on the citizens of Berk. Fire burns in a pit at the center of that table. High above is a metal sculpture of a dragon impaled on a Viking spear--as much a symbol of the Viking view of justice as the blindfolded woman with the balanced scales is of ours.

Stoick proposes a bold sea journey to seek out and destroy the dragons in their hidden nest. "Either we finish them, or they'll finish us" is his succinct assessment of the situation. No shades of gray, all black and white. Another member of the tribe cautions that such an expedition has been tried before, with disastrous results. "We're Vikings. It's an occupational hazard," Stoick replies, in philosophical concurrence with his name. Fierce Viking faces engraved into his shoulder epaulets, or armor, resemble Stoick's. He is Berk's living embodiment of a mythical Viking warrior. But when he calls for volunteers to ship out with him, no one steps forward. Not even his best and oldest friend, Gobber. Everyone knows the risks of such a voyage. But as the village Chief, Stoick realizes Berk cannot indefinitely sustain the livestock losses it did in the most recent dragon attack. Risks must be taken in order to end the threat.

Stoick is no tyrant. Instead of browbeating his reluctant fellow citizens, he offers them an alternative. "Those who stay can look after Hiccup." Such an assignment is, apparently, a fate worse than death. All hands immediately shoot up to volunteer for the voyage. It's a moment of high comedy. But on reflection, it's also one of deep humiliation for Hiccup, who, fortunately, is not present. How would he react if he were? A person can only withstand so much abuse, even if
that abuse is unintentional, before he contemplates an extreme remedy.

*How to Train Your Dragon* is the kind of powerful storytelling, in fairy tale form, that lends itself to hypothetical speculation. What if events in the next scene had not taken our struggling hero in a new direction? What if he were compelled to face an endless future of shame and self-doubt, eventually leading to self-hatred? Hiccup is young and impressionable. Not everything is carved in stone for him, yet. But time is running out. And the backhanded insult to his son by which Stoick motivates his people to take bold action against the dragons illustrates that fact almost as poignantly as Hiccup’s poignantly stated desire “to be one of you guys.” Neither Hiccup nor Rapunzel, at the beginning of their respective tales, possesses infinite resilience. If they do not act to improve their unhappy situations, they will never rise above the crippling emotions those situations will eventually engender.

After the village gathering breaks up, Gobber and Stoick remain behind to talk privately about the same matter Stoick so cleverly exploited moments earlier. “I’ll pack my undies,” quips the blacksmith as he girds himself to battle dragons again. Though courageous to the core, he’s armed with plenty of battle-scarred humor to counteract the fear he knows so well. Gobber keeps one foot in and one foot outside the traditional Viking outlook that Stoick embraces fully. Like Hiccup, the blacksmith is capable of seeing things with a measure of detachment. But perhaps because of his age, Gobber is not quite as flexible in that regard as his apprentice proves to be.

To Gobber’s surprise, Stoick insists he stay behind and train new recruits to be dragon fighters. Like the aging soldier who becomes a drill sergeant, guiding inexperienced soldiers through basic training. But Gobber has pride, and that pride is tied to the honor of real combat, as he demonstrated earlier when he hobbled out of his blacksmith shop to help his fellow Berkians
fight dragons. He’s also clever, using Hiccup against the Chief just as the Chief used Hiccup against the other villagers. If he is kept busy training new recruits, Gobber reasons, Hiccup will be alone in the blacksmith shop with “molten steel, razor-sharp blades, lots of time to himself. What could possibly go wrong?” It’s a rhetorical question, implying unmitigated disaster.

Like Stoick in the previous scene, Gobber does not mean to be cruel to Hiccup. In fact his larger purpose here might not be to secure his own place in the dragon hunt but to fulfill Hiccup’s yearning “to be one of you guys.” Yet his comment reaffirms Hiccup as the gold standard by which all incompetence is measured. What a tremendous burden for one person, let alone a teenage kid, to bear. By reminding us of Hiccup’s infamy throughout the village, this scene and its predecessor set up the next scene as critical for the boy’s future.

Stoick voices concern for his son and seeks advice from his best friend. Gobber recommends entering Hiccup in dragon training. Visually backed by a stout pillar carved with vivid images of Viking warriors, the old veteran tries the only way he knows to give Hiccup a chance to make his mark in the world, as the boy requested earlier. But Stoick is convinced Hiccup wouldn’t stand a chance in the training arena against their common enemy. Though for much more benevolent reasons, he is as overly protective of Hiccup as Mother Gothel is of Rapunzel. Yet the attitudes of both parents, whether kindly or selfishly motivated, are damaging to their children.

“From the time he could crawl he’s been ... different,” complains Stoick. His emphasis on the word “different” indicates how much conformity is valued in this tight-knit community. “He has the attention span of a sparrow,” on the other hand, is a misperception by Stoick. Hiccup is frequently disobedient and distracted. But when motivated, he’s more than capable of focusing his full attention on one thing at a time, including the mangler catapult he designed and
successfully deployed in battle.

Humorously illustrating Stoick’s charge against Hiccup, Gobber’s attention is diverted when his false tooth falls into his mug of ale. For a moment he behaves like an addle-brained old man, preoccupied with trivia while ignoring Stoick’s complaint about Hiccup being more interested in searching for trolls than in fishing during a recent father/son excursion in the forest. “Trolls exist!” Gobber insists, pointlessly explaining their inclination to steal left socks only. Maybe Hiccup’s childhood fascination with trolls can be traced back to tales told to him by the old blacksmith, who has obviously spent more quality time with the boy than has Stoick. If Hiccup could not succeed in his father’s world, then why not in the realm of fantasy supplied by Gobber? At the very least, Hiccup’s childhood interest in supernatural creatures reflects the widespread appeal of fairy tales.

Stoick recounts an incident in his own childhood when his father, for reasons the boy couldn’t understand at the time, told him to bang his head repeatedly against a rock. The rock eventually broke, teaching young Stoick the value of unquestioning fidelity to traditional perceptions and authority. He concluded from that lesson in blind obedience that Vikings could survive and accomplish almost anything. Visible behind him as he proclaims this truth is a huge mural depicting a Viking killing a dragon. The strength of tradition, formalized and enshrined in art, is evident throughout Berk, in the architecture of houses and ships and in the design of weapons and even domestic implements.

Despite fiddling with his false tooth and pontificating on the barely relevant topic of trolls, Gobber does pay attention when Stoick launches into his traditional catechism. “Oh, here we go again” the blacksmith mutters under his breath, as though he’s heard the Chief’s spiel many
times before. Like Hiccup’s snide comment about the villagers needing fewer meals, Gobber offers an alternative, disrespectful ending to Stoick’s head-colliding-with-a-rock story. “You got a headache” he mocks. But unlike Hiccup, he does so under his breath, only to himself. Stoick doesn’t hear him.

“Even as a boy I knew what I had to become. Hiccup is not that boy,” Stoick complains. On the contrary, Hiccup wants very badly to be like his father. But his inquisitive nature and frail body make it impossible for him to do so through blind obedience, such as Stoick gave his father. Hiccup must find his own way, which might not end up being the traditional Viking way.

Finally locating and restoring his false tooth to its proper place, Gobber replies to Stoick’s complaints directly and clearly. “You can’t stop him, Stoick. You can only prepare him” he advises, adding that Stoick will not always be around to protect the boy, who is probably “out there” already, on his own, defying his father’s orders. True enough, as we’ve seen. But even Gobber has no idea how far “out there” Hiccup will travel. Far beyond the traditions Stoick faithfully and Gobber somewhat less faithfully embrace.

The next day we glide high over a mountainous landscape, looking down from a dragon’s eye view at Berk Island. Then we descend to ground level and follow Hiccup searching for the Night Fury he’s certain he downed the night before. He too looks down, at the map he’s drawn of the surrounding landscape. Both points of view supply a detached perspective. But apparently Hiccup’s detached overview provides little illumination this time. Frustrated, he scribbles over the “X” marks on his map signifying the many locations he’s already searched, unsuccessfully, for the wounded beast. Accepting his tragic fate as a cursed member of his tribe, he mutters, “The gods hate me,” berating himself by wondering out loud how anyone could be so
incompetent as to lose a dragon. He’s internalized his father’s and the village’s critical opinion of
him. Viewed next in extreme long shot, he appears as puny and insignificant against the vast
forest backdrop. He feels the same way.

Bettelheim wrote that extreme disappointment can lead a child to withdraw from the world and
into himself, “unless fantasy comes to his rescue” (Bettelheim, 123). Alone in the woods, Hiccup
experiences a fantasy come true that alters his life for the better—a wild fantasy far surpassing
what he claimed he accomplished during the previous night’s battle. In the face of failure and
ridicule “only exaggerated hopes and fantasies of future achievements can balance the scales so
that the child can go on living and striving” (Bettelheim, 123). The journey that Hiccup begins in
this scene exceeds anything Stoick, Gobber, his fellow teens or any other Viking ever dreamt of
accomplishing.

Hiccup angrily slaps at a tree branch blocking his path. It snaps back, hitting him in the face
and seeming to confirm his feeling that the gods have conspired against him. Or maybe not,
because at second glance that same tree signals the possibility of success. A broken branch much
larger than the one that struck Hiccup hangs down to the ground where a trench has been dug
out, as though by a large object that fell from the sky. Hiccup’s cartographic calculations were
not in vain after all.

Curious, Hiccup follows the trench to a ridge. Peering over that ridge to the other side, he spots
a dragon lying on the ground below. Instinctively he gasps and retreats back behind the ridge.
Though by no means a coward, Hiccup is not crazy-brave like so many other Vikings blinded to
danger by their code of honor. His moments of acknowledged terror strike me as eminently
human. He is us in many ways, though better than most of us in others. He is both what we are
and what we’d like to be. His fear makes it easier for us to appreciate his bravery, knowing what he must to overcome in order to be brave.

Wide-eyed with terror and curiosity (a priceless image from the film’s animators), Hiccup peers over the ridge a second time. The dragon is not moving. Hiccup nervously fumbles for his knife and cautiously approaches the beast. We peer with the boy from behind the relative safety of a boulder. The dormant dragon is pitch black, shiny and scaly. He looks like a gigantic bat, less colorful but more intimidating than the dragons we saw earlier.

Assuming the creature is dead, Hiccup celebrates victory. “This fixes everything!” he proclaims in triumph, going from goat to glory in a single day. He arrogantly props his foot on the dragon’s leg, as though posing for a statue to be sculpted in his honor. This action is equivalent to Rapunzel breaking into joyous song after first setting foot on the ground outside her tower. But his mission, like hers, is not quite accomplished. A roar and movement from the dragon sends the startled conqueror reeling backwards. The beast lives. Hiccup has more work to do. Though cautious now, he courageously approaches the dragon again, with his knife pointed forward, the same way Rapunzel brandished her frying pan when faced with similarly intimidating unknowns, including Flynn Rider and the Snuggly Duckling thugs and ruffians.

From Hiccup’s point of view we pan across the dragon’s heaving chest to his head. His eyes are open now, green and reptilian, with alien, vertical slits for pupils. Hiccup’s fierce determination softens to surprise and then a trace of pity when the dragon emits a deep moan. Breathing heavily himself, the boy re-focuses on his original mission—the key to his future happiness back in Berk. Speaking to himself, in an effort to stiffen his resolve, he declares his intention to cut out the dragon’s heart and give it to his father as proof that he is worthy of
respect. More than that, killing a Night Fury would be unprecedented in Viking history. "I’m a Viking!" he shouts at the stricken beast he must kill in order to become the hero he’s wanted to be for so long.

Closing his eyes to any appeal for mercy, Hiccup raises his knife for the kill. But before striking he opens them again and looks at his intended target. Life or death, humiliation or glory, self-loathing or self-respect, all hang in the balance. The teenager weakens, then reaffirms his resolve, firmly shutting his eyes again to strike the fatal blow. The dragon now closes his eyes and turns his head away from that anticipated blow, resigning himself to the only fate he believes possible at the hands of a merciless Viking.

Hiccup cannot bring himself to kill the Night Fury—the greatest enemy of his tribe and the key to what he was convinced, until this moment, was his key to happiness. The boy who has long been singled out as the most incompetent member of his tribe shows mercy to the deadliest of dragons. In other words, Hiccup confronts and defeats the dragon within himself. And maybe that’s the underlying meaning of the film’s title. To “train” your dragon refers not to subjugating a hostile species, but to taming the beast that lurks within one’s self. And that’s no easy task when the rewards for unleashing that beast are so tempting. Not to mention our human inclination to pass on to others, in one form or another, any pain previously inflicted on our selves. When Rapunzel reaches out, however unsuccessfully, to save Mother Gothel from falling to her death out the tower window, she too rises above her baser nature.

Joseph Campbell notes that the hero engages in a lifelong battle with the image of his father, who may be represented by any number of foes (Campbell, 133-134). In a tribal setting the hero’s ego may reach out beyond himself to encompass his entire tribe, with all other societies
and their inhabitants reduced to the status of arch-enemy. “Instead of clearing his own heart the zealot tries to clear the world . . . a perpetual holy war is hurled (with good conscience, and indeed a sense of pious service) against whatever . . . alien people happens to occupy the position of neighbor.” Stoick’s unrelenting, righteous war against dragons is an example of such zealotry. Hiccup commits an act of blasphemy when he spares the life of and later befriends a dragon: the worst dragon, according to Viking myth. Fortunately, that dragon is able to respond in kind to Hiccup’s compassion, though requiring some time to overcome his suspicion of humans. In a larger sense, Hiccup duels with himself, of which the Night Fury and all other dragons in this movie are a reflection. By giving that reflection a separate and very colorful identity, as fairy tales often do, the filmmakers make Hiccup’s private duel more colorful, entertaining and memorable. In the same way Mother Gothel was a dark reflection of Rapunzel’s real parents, and of Rapunzel herself, in Tangled.

Hiccup turns and walks away from his victim, muttering “I did this” in shame rather than pride. He turns back to the helpless animal with a look of discontent on his face. Has he changed his mind? Cut to a close up of the dragon’s face. His eyes are wide open. We hear the sound of metal slicing through something. The dragon’s thick skin? The beast’s eyes narrow, his expression turning feral.

Self-restraint is only half the equation. Hiccup slices through the ropes that bind the dragon. Not content to let the beast die of starvation, he sets it free. A moment later, the dragon turns on the boy and pins him against a boulder, fixing him with a terrifying glare, his luminous green corneas highlighting reptilian pupils. Shown in close-up from Hiccup’s point of view, the beast looms large and intimidating, consumed by anger and a thirst for revenge. One good turn may
deserve another, but there is no guarantee things will turn out that way.

The sound of bagpipes within the tense background music reeks of tradition and ritual, the very things Hiccup defied by not killing the dragon when he had the chance. It’s now the victim’s turn to make a choice: reaffirm traditional dragon hatreds or match the Viking’s compassion. Viewed from Hiccup’s vantage point, but with the top of Hiccup’s tousle-haired, adolescent head visible at the bottom of the frame, the black dragon hovers over him, raising its wings and head and opening its red mouth to flash pearly white teeth, like some huge vampire bat about to strike. Though not long, sharp and ragged like the teeth of most other dragons, they resemble instead those of a killer whale, the top oceanic predator. One thing is obvious. This Toothless is not the cute, cuddly, albeit naughty dragon of the original stories by Cressida Cowell.

Shown in profile, the dragon opens its mouth wide and roars into Hiccup’s face at close range. The contrast between their bodies is striking. The Viking is hopelessly overmatched. Expecting death, Hiccup closes his eyes and turns his head away, exactly as the dragon did when faced with death by Hiccup’s knife. But after delivering his bellow of rage and warning, the equivalent of Hiccup declaring “I’m a Viking!,” the Night Fury abruptly flies away, leaving Hiccup stunned but alive. The boy’s show of mercy has been answered in kind.

Flies away? Well, not quite. Still bellowing, the dragon lurches and crashes into a cliff. Something’s wrong with him. By like token, Hiccup, after recovering composure sufficiently to stand up, promptly faints to the ground in a pathetic heap. It’s a moment of very human comedy, because he’s reacting like most of us would. We laugh with, not at him. The story is filled with similar moments of potential self-recognition: whether it’s Hiccup concealing pain behind sarcasm, reacting with dumbfounded adoration to the sight of a girl beyond his reach, thrilling to
his accomplishment of downing a dragon, mocking his insensitive father when that father isn’t around to hear him, or whining about this and that. Hiccup’s collapse mirrors the dragon’s crash. His weak cry as he loses consciousness echoes the dragon’s screams of frustration as it tries and fails to fly. But Hiccup’s loss of mobility is temporary. The dragon’s is not. And that fact opens the way for the second act in their unlikely friendship.

The first close encounter between Hiccup and the Night Fury is a wish-fulfillment for the young Viking, but not a traditional one. If it were, Hiccup would have slain the mighty dragon and dazzled all of Berk, especially his father and Astrid, with proof of his “raw Vikingness.” Instead, he fulfilled a desire he didn’t even realize he had until the moment of choice was at hand: a wish that challenges his father’s values to their core. There is only one Viking like Hiccup in this movie, and only one Night Fury.

Returning home, Hiccup tries to sneak past Stoick and retreat to his room without having to account for his unauthorized absence. But Stoick spots the boy and initiates a discussion with him. Both characters would rather avoid this particular conversation, for different reasons. But it cannot be avoided. So they blurt out their first words simultaneously, in effect cancelling out each other. The boy who needed to fight dragons so badly that he disobeyed his father to do so no longer wants to. The father who so feared for the life of his fragile, scatterbrained son that he refused to let the boy fight dragons now agrees to it. They’ve reversed positions simultaneously, reaching a point of disagreement once more.

Confusion leads to clarity, but only on one side of the equation. Stoick re-states his approval of Hiccup’s enrollment in dragon training. Hiccup, visually counterpointed by Viking shields decorated with images of fierce dragons and Vikings, and a large Viking sword like the one he
sharpened at the blacksmith’s shop, tries to avoid that training without revealing his real reason for doing so. As usual, he relies on humor to avoid the painful. There’s a surplus of dragon-fighting Vikings, he insists, but not enough bread-making or small home repair Vikings. The kid who more than anything wanted to be a Viking warrior now prefers a career in baking? Stoick, doesn’t buy it. He tosses Hiccup a battleaxe nearly as big as the boy.

Hiccup tries a more honest approach. “I don’t want to fight dragons.” But he offers no explanation for his change of heart because it would entail a revelation of his sparing the life of a Night Fury. “Yes you do,” insists Stoick, who heard his son say precisely that in the movie’s first scene, So Hiccup tries to be a little more honest. “Dad, I can’t kill dragons.” But Stoick misinterprets that claim as an expression of Hiccup’s doubts about his ability to do the job. The Chief reassures him, “But you will” kill dragons, meaning in time and with proper training. So Hiccup makes one more attempt to convince his father not to send him to training. “I’m really extra sure that I won’t.” From “don’t want” to “can’t” to “won’t” is a step-by-step progression towards a moral truth Hiccup is not yet willing to admit to Stoick.

“It’s time, Hiccup,” soberly announces Stoick, overriding his son’s objections with an appeal to Viking tradition. “Can you not hear me?!” Hiccup complains in frustration that harkens all the way back to Cressida Cowell’s original stories, where again the father was not inclined to listen to his son. Hiccup pleads for understanding, not lectures. But Stoick cannot hear him. The village Chief merely re-phrases his traditional argument in stronger terms. “When you carry this axe, you carry all of us with you. Which means you walk like us, you talk like us, you think like us.” It’s a succinct and powerful ode to the advantages of communal solidarity in a dangerous world.

“No more of … this,” Stoick adds, motioning to his son, as Gobber did earlier. “You just
gestured to *all* of me,” protests Hiccup. It’s like the refrain of a song, repeated over and over to make the point that Hiccup must change *everything* about himself in order to become a respected Viking. And that is, as it was when Gobber made the same point, impossible.

Stoick ends the debate by striking a bargain entirely on his own terms. “Deal?” he demands rather than requests. Hiccup protests one last time. “This conversation is getting very one sided” is a typical complaint of teenagers increasingly expected to live up to adult standards but whose opinions are seldom taken seriously by adults. Hiccup finally yields, agreeing to his father’s bargain. Stoick departs on his dragon quest, promising to return, “probably,” which implicitly acknowledges the danger of his mission. “And I’ll be here ... maybe,” replies Hiccup, referring to the dangers of dragon training, but perhaps secretly referring to the critical choice he must eventually make between obeying or disobeying Stoick’s edict to fight dragons. The big battleaxe Hiccup holds in his skinny arms and small hands looks wildly out of place. His voice is full of regret. As Bettelheim, Campbell and others have said, it’s not easy to leave behind what’s familiar and set out on a new, revolutionary path.

Hiccup pleading unsuccessfully with his father to avoid dragon training is roughly equivalent to Rapunzel arguing with Mother Gothel, also unsuccessfully, to be taken out of their tower to see the floating lights in person. Both hero and heroine have to defy their parents in order to commence their heroic journeys to better themselves. Stoick and Mother Gothel are very different characters, yet both are impediments to their children’s maturity.

The next day dragon training begins in Berk’s large arena. Astrid, Snotlout, Fishlegs, Ruffnut and Tuffnut are Hiccup’s fellow recruits, and they are eager for the challenge. The camera, gazing up from a low angle, rotates subjectively with them as their roving eyes take in their
imposing, history-laden surroundings. The arena is enclosed on all sides, with a chain-link roof overhead. It’s a place designed to confine dragons, but also to confine and shape the perceptions of young trainees. In that regard, it’s similar to Rapunzel’s tower.

This is a big day for the recruits: as much a ritual of acceptance into adult society as it is a practical lesson in fighting their common enemy. Taking a cue from their elders, they cockily hope to suffer visible battle scars during training. Like Gobber’s two missing limbs, those scars are badges of honor in Viking society. Reluctantly bringing up the rear, unnoticed until now, Hiccup mocks the enthusiasm of his fellow teenagers. “Pain. Love it.” No, he doesn’t. They turn as a group, reacting with contempt to the runt of their generational litter.

Gobber defines their mission in simple terms. Whoever excels in training will receive the honor of killing a dragon in front of the entire village. This gives Snotlout an opportunity to retaliate for Hiccup’s mockery of the martial mentality Snotlout reveres. Since Hiccup claimed to have already killed a Night Fury, which of course no one believes, does he get credit for it in training? All of the other recruits, except Astrid, laugh or grin at Snotlout’s insult. Is Astrid more kindly disposed towards Hiccup, or simply too focused on the serious task ahead to care one way or the other about our hero?

Hiccup sighs, informing us that Snotlout’s insult, compounded by most of the other trainees, hit its mark. Gobber misreads Hiccup’s sigh as an expression of his fear of dragons rather than his fear of humiliation, and unintentionally makes matters worse by trying to comfort the boy. He insists that Hiccup’s small stature and lack of physical strength will be perceived by the dragons as a sign of sickness or insanity. The beasts will therefore bypass him and go after the more “Viking-like” trainees instead. Singled out and once again ostracized from the group,
Hiccup silently retaliates with a resentful side-glance. Unintentionally insensitively, Gobber rudely shoves Hiccup into line with the other teenagers.

Fishlegs is the scholar of the group. Armed with encyclopedic though narrowly traditional knowledge of dragons, he describes their intimidating traits and weaponry, frightening himself more than anyone else. Such knowledge has its place, as will be demonstrated in a later scene, but not here or now. Irritated, Gobber silences the boy and asserts his authority over the recruits. This will be a difficult rite of passage. Recruits must earn their drill sergeant’s respect. And to Snotlout’s consternation, they must do so by learning on the job. With no prior instruction, Gobber unleashes their first test—an ill-tempered dragon of the Gronckle species.

_How to Train Your Dragon_ is an unusual fairy tale in that the tests our young hero must endure are of two distinct and in some ways contradictory types: the traditional Viking tests of courage, skill and strength in dragon fighting, and a set of _ethical_ tests that only the hero comprehends. To do well in the first set of tests is sometimes to fail in the second.

The Gronckle charges out of his unlocked prison cell. The trainees scatter to avoid him. Gobber fires questions at them in the midst of battle. What’s the first thing they’ll need, he asks. “A doctor?” replies Hiccup, again using humor to counteract fear. Equally if not more terrified, Fishlegs replies in kind: “Five speeds?” But Astrid, unafraid and keenly focused on their assigned mission, correctly answers, “a shield.” Gobber confirms and they all race for the pile of shields in the middle of the arena.

Gobber tries to be impartial about his trainees, but cannot help giving special attention to Hiccup, assisting him with a heavy shield the boy can barely lift. Tuffnut and Ruffnut battle each other over another shield, distracting them from their primary foe, who blasts their shield with a
burst of flame and sends them both tumbling to the ground. Gobber declares them out of the game. Figuratively speaking, they are “dead.”

Learning from the bad example set by the Twins, the four remaining trainees pay closer attention to their instructor’s next command, to make noise by banging their axes against their shields, thereby confusing the dragon’s aim. Surrounding the beast, they perform as a team, not a group of amateurs squabbling among themselves.

Gobber poses his next question. How many blasts of flame can a Gronckle fire before running out of fuel? Snotlout incorrectly guesses five. Fishlegs, by contrast, has done his homework. He correctly answers six, but is so pleased with himself that he too gets distracted, loses his shield to one of the Gronckle’s six blasts and flees in panic. Gobber counts him out of the contest. The equally unenthusiastic Hiccup, still carrying his shield, seeks double protection by hiding behind a wooden barrier, like a bullfighter’s sanctuary, along the outer edge of the arena. Gobber orders him back into the fray. Hiccup obeys, until the dragon launches a ball of flame at him and he returns to his shelter.

Snotlout picks a bad time to flirt with Astrid, and he too gets eliminated. That’s four out of six trainees who fail their first test because they allow themselves to be distracted by other, irrelevant concerns. Astrid and Hiccup are left standing alone, together. Taking a cue from Snotlout, but more shyly, Hiccup flirts, “So, I guess it’s just you and me, huh.” Not a chance. Astrid deserts him and he too loses his shield to a blast of flame from their mutual foe. The dragon pursues and corners him. Preparing to fry the hapless teenager at close range, the Gronckle is stopped only by the intervention of Gobber, who latches onto the beast with his artificial hook and manhandles it back into its cage.
Concluding their first training session, Gobber reminds his exhausted students that a dragon will “always, always go for the kill.” He’s a wise old man who just saved Hiccup from certain death. But he’s wrong about dragons in general, and in particular about the dragon Hiccup set free. Only Hiccup is willing to question conventional Viking wisdom. Gobber rudely pulls the boy up on his feet and departs. Hiccup stares at the seared, crackling scar left on the arena wall by the Gronkle’s fireball attack. Gobber’s final proclamation from Lesson One becomes Hiccup’s first question later that afternoon, when he revisits the scene where he downed the Night Fury the night before.

Technically, Hiccup failed his first dragon training test, as did all the other trainees except Astrid. But out of that failure Hiccup begins to forge success in his private series of tests. Rapunzel too faces challenging tests in the world outside her tower. And like Hiccup, she forges unconventional solutions.

“So why didn’t you (kill me)?” Hiccup ponders as he hefts one of the mangler stones with which he brought down the Night Fury. Venturing further along the path he took the previous day, in a forest full of adventure and danger, he comes to the cove into which the Night Fury fled after sparing Hiccup’s life. Birds fly freely in and out of that large enclosure, but there is no dragon in sight—just a few loose black scales lying on a boulder high up on the rocky cliff wall. Hiccup picks one up and examines it. But while indulging his intellectual curiosity, which is one of his outstanding traits, he and we are shocked by a huge black body whipping past at close range. It’s one of several reminders the film provides that Hiccup’s open-minded, nonaggressive approach to dragons is not without risks. The young Viking could have been taken by surprise and easily killed. Instead, preoccupied with attempts to escape from the cove, the dragon
doesn’t even notice him.

Recovering from the surprise of his second close encounter with the Night Fury, Hiccup watches keenly from the cliff as the dragon tries unsuccessfully several more times to launch himself into the air. Taking advantage of his physically and emotionally detached perch, Hiccup draws a portrait of the Night Fury in his notebook. He’s an artist as well as a scientist and an engineer. “Why don’t you just fly away?” he asks rhetorically and, so as not to be detected, quietly. That’s twice now he’s asked questions rather than merely aped traditional Viking pronouncements about dragons. Noticing that one of the Night Fury’s tail fins is missing, he corrects his drawing. More naturalistic than fanciful, his drawing reminds me a little of Leonardo Da Vinci’s renditions of human figures. Hiccup is learning the facts about this dragon, not weaving myths about it. And he’s left-handed, as is Cressida Cowell’s hero, adding another aspect to Stoick’s unflattering description of him as “different.”

The dragon’s awkward flights, inevitable crashes and sounds of frustration are pathetic. Landing near a pond in the center of the cove, he tries to catch fish from the shoreline, but fails because he is unable to take them by surprise, as he could have from the air, if he still had the power of flight. It’s been a long time since he’s eaten.

Hiccup accidentally drops his charcoal pencil, which clatters to the ground below. The dragon looks up and spots him. Traditional enemies stare silently at one another, each tilting his head slightly in an unwitting expression of curiosity. Is that a purr we hear from the catlike Night Fury? At least it’s not the teeth-baring, ear-shattering roar of fear and rage we heard during their earlier encounter. They can now tolerate each other, if as yet only from a safe distance. Hiccup raises his head, exhibiting even stronger curiosity. The dragon reciprocates. It’s their first civil
confrontation.

Meade Hall is a cathedral-like structure of Wagnerian proportions, decorated with mythological depictions of Vikings and dragons as eternal enemies. Two enormous statues of Viking warriors stand guard on either side of the entrance, dwarfing the tiny figure of Hiccup as he approaches. Rain falls from the night sky. The great hall offers shelter from the storm for the residents of Berk, in more ways than one. It embodies the communal identity and history that encourages solidarity and conformity of perception among otherwise vulnerable individuals. Within that cavernous chamber, Gobber and all but one of his trainees are gathered around a table, discussing the lessons of their first day of dragon training.

Hiccup enters through massively tall doors and approaches his fellow trainees. With his hair slicked down from the rain, he looks like a half-drowned rat. But we know the reason for his tardiness, and that renders him more impressive than he looks. Astrid describes in technical detail what went wrong during their first dragon training lesson earlier that morning. Gobber praises her for being so perceptively critical of her own performance. Hiccup grabs a cooked bird leg off the communal table. But unlike his fellow teens, Hiccup does not eat it. He ignores Snotlout’s challenging grin and sits at a different table, alone. Officially, he is part of the group. Emotionally, he is not.

Responding to Gobber’s question about where Hiccup went wrong in the arena, Ruffnut and Tuffnut supply sarcastic answers intended to humiliate him. Astrid offers a more objective assessment. Gobber rewards the smart-mouthed Twins with smacks to the backs of their heads, as he did Snotlout when he badgered Hiccup in the first scene. He walks over to Hiccup as though to purposefully include him in the group discussion. Then he tosses the trainees a copy of
the Dragon Manual, an encyclopedia of accumulated Viking knowledge about their sworn
enemy. Hiccup observes his compatriots from a distance, less likely to be noticed and teased. He
wants to be a respected part of the group, but at the same time his new perspective on dragons
sets him apart. Thunder rumbles outside the Hall. Gobber concludes, from decades of
experience, there will be no dragon attacks tonight, then departs, instructing his young recruits to
study the manual.

The Twins and Snotlout opt out of the academic approach to dragons, preferring action over
study. Unlike Hiccup, they just want to kill dragons, not learn about them. Fishlegs, on the other
hand, has already read the Manual several times. He’s eager to share his knowledge with the
other trainees, but they are bored by his facts and figures and soon depart. He trails after them,
still seeking their acceptance. He has absorbed much more Viking lore about dragons than have
they, but unlike Hiccup he is not yet able to question it.

Left alone with Astrid, Hiccup crosses from his table to hers. In his awkward, shuffling,
insecure way, he tries to make friends with her, the way Fishlegs tried and failed to do with
Snotlout and the Twins, but with an additional, romantic purpose. “So, I guess we’ll share,” he
suggests hopefully. She tersely declares she’s already read the book, shoves it in his direction
and abruptly departs. Typically, she’s done her homework in advance, and has no interest in
flirtation with a loser like Hiccup, or with anyone else for that matter. She may not taunt him, as
do the other teenagers, but she has no romantic interest in him either. Or if she has, she represses
it in favor of her quest to become a respected Viking warrior. Like Flynn Rider in Tangled, her
transformation into a better person is dependent on what she learns by example from the hero.
And she is not yet ready or willing to accept that learning experience.
Rejected by Astrid, Hiccup tries to salvage a little dignity by pretending to be delighted to have the manual all to himself. “I’ll see you …” he calls after her, making one last effort to secure a date, of sorts, with the girl of his dreams. But she closes the door behind her before he can finish his vague proposal. “Tomorrow” he adds lamely, to himself. But what if Astrid had been more receptive to Hiccup? Would he have been, as a result, more inclined to accept her traditional, uncompromising attitude towards dragons, and less inclined to pursue a very different course on his own? Just as one wonders if Flynn Rider would have reacted differently if he had learned about the magical qualities of Rapunzel’s hair before he started to care about her. These two movies are full of dramatic turning points and fascinating what-ifs.

Later that same night, Meade Hall is dark. The villagers have gone home, except for one. Hiccup emerges from the shadows. With two small candles to light his way, he sits down at his lonely table to study the Dragon Manual. From our vantage point, far overhead, he presents a tiny light of inquisitiveness within a vast gloom of oppressive ignorance. While thunder rumbles in the distance, Hiccup flips through the book page by page, absorbing traditional Viking descriptions of every known species of dragon. Each classification concludes the same way: “Extremely dangerous. Kill on sight.” No mercy given or expected. No exceptions.

The Manual is an illustrated book of nightmares: a tale of horror that frightens even the increasingly skeptical Hiccup, who is startled by a particularly loud clap of thunder. He glances behind himself, half-expecting to see the monster depicted on the page he was reading—a terrifying beast who spits scalding water at his victims. But the only “monster” he and we see, illuminated by a flash of lightning, is the towering statue of a fierce Viking. All we have to fear is Fear itself. The power of myth, even to a scientific mind, can be considerable. One of the
dragons depicted so vividly in the manual moves slightly in a menacing fashion, as though coming to life in Hiccup’s imagination. It’s a stylized depiction of the emotional impact tradition still has on his mind. An impact he must battle on his own if he is to find a new way of seeing the world. This powerful scene is the equivalent of telling ghost stories around a campfire late at night. We can scare ourselves with a good tale, even if there is no monster lurking in the shadows.

The apparent movement of a static drawing in the Dragon Manual anticipates animated films such as *Tangled* and the *Dragon* movies. Like Rapunzel briefly strumming her guitar in a rock and roll fashion, Hiccup’s imagination reaches forward beyond his era. He could be the next Dean DeBlois, director of the story in which Hiccup appears. Both Hiccup and Rapunzel are “progressive” characters in the best sense of that word.

The last page of the Dragon Manual is devoted to the Night Fury, “the unholy offspring of Lightning and Death Itself.” What a wonderfully vague, superstitious description of a monster. The Book provides no details about the dragon’s physical appearance or powers, and no fanciful illustration. In other words, it’s a description of the Unknown—the mythical Boogeyman. The Book warns Vikings never to do battle with a Night Fury, recommending instead abject retreat and prayer that the dragon does not find you. Sounds like a description of the Devil incarnate, until Hiccup plops his private notebook onto the Manual’s mostly empty page. The notebook contains a detailed drawing of an actual Night Fury, with a missing tail fin attesting to its vulnerability, contrasting with the unconquerable beast described in the Manual. Science replaces superstition. Hiccup’s understanding of dragons, though not yet comprehensive, already surpasses that of his father, Gobber and all past generations of Vikings.
The Night Fury page in the Book of Dragons has a visible wrinkle which curiously matches the scar on Hiccup’s chin. On the broadest fairy tale scale, Hiccup and Toothless are the same character. They just don’t know yet how alike they are.

Hiccup’s accurate rendering of a Night Fury is juxtaposed again, as we segue to the next scene, with the Vikings’ mythical image of a dragon, wishfully impaled by two Viking swords, imprinted on the sail of one of Stoick’s ships. The illustrations depict two contrasting points of view, each about to act according to its own inclination. Stoick, sensing the nearby presence of his deadly foe, orders his ships into a fogbank he’s convinced conceals the dragons’ nest. Rugged Viking war vessels, their hulls encrusted with barnacles, glide purposefully through the water and disappear into that fog, through which we can vaguely see the tops of towering rock formations. If old-time sailors could imagine mermaids when they spotted manatees, why couldn’t Vikings envision dragons when they encountered such imposing geological phenomena? A flash of light briefly illuminates the outline of a huge dragon perched on one of those rock formations, violently defending himself and his kind from Viking attack. It appears to be a monstrous Nightmare.

We jump immediately to Hiccup back in the arena, holding his shield as though ready for the same hostile encounter as his father, but in fact much more interested in learning about Night Furies than battling the Deadly Nadder that is his current training assignment. Hoping for more information than he found in the Book of Dragons, he asks Gobber if there’s a sequel. A moment later he is almost incinerated by a blast of fire from the Nadder. Ready or not, the battle is on. Gobber orders Hiccup to focus on the present. And the present is all about “Attack!” The Nadder chases trainees through a maze constructed from tall, portable, wooden partitions. The dragon
has the advantage of detachable spikes along its tail, which it can hurl like knives. But it also has a blind spot directly in front of its head, where enemies can elude detection. The ever-bickering Twins, Tuffnut and Ruffnut, take advantage of that blind spot until an inevitable sibling dispute betrays their presence. It’s another display of immaturity, like their performance in the first lesson. Observing their folly from his perch high overhead, Gobber is amused, but less so by Hiccup’s persistent and ill-timed questions about mysterious Night Furies who are not part of today’s lesson. How does a person sneak up on one, the boy asks. “No one’s ever met one and lived to tell the tale” replies Gobber, fending him off again, then ordering him back into the Nadder battle. Stoick once said about his son, “He has the attention span of a sparrow.” That’s only a half-truth. Right now he’s passionately interested in the Night Fury he left at the cove, not the Nadder he’s supposed to confront in the arena.

If Gobber has little success deflecting Hiccup’s seemingly irrelevant questions, Astrid fares better. Hiccup obeys her silent command to crouch down and be quiet. Using their shields as a fulcrum, she and Snotlout tuck and roll through an opening in the maze and past the dragon’s blind spot. Hiccup tries to imitate them but fails, his weight insufficient to flip his shield. The Nadder spots him and attacks, nearly catching the fleeing boy in his jaws. Snotlout, for the second time in as many days, falls prey to his impulse to show off for Astrid. He hurls his battle hammer at the dragon and misses, badly, drawing what looks like a chuckle of derision from the Nadder. Dragons have a sense of humor? Maybe they’re not so different from Vikings after all. Astrid wisely withdraws. Her admirer is nearly roasted while offering lame excuses for his poor performance.

Pursuing Astrid, its future best friend, the Nadder knocks over wall after wall in the
free-standing maze. Astrid barely escapes. Leaping off the top of a collapsing partition, she lands on top of Hiccup, who again has stopped to ask Gobber more pointless (as far as everyone else is concerned) questions about Night Furies. Astrid has trouble extricating herself from her entanglement with Hiccup. Together at last! He offers to help, but she insists on doing it all herself, rudely pushing her hand into his face for leverage. From a safe distance, the Twins make fun of Astrid and insult Hiccup. "Oooo, love on the battlefield," remarks Tuffnut. "She could do better," adds Ruffnut. It's an amusing moment, with a whiff of sexual content. Why should these Vikings be different from other teenagers? It seems appropriate that Astrid's axe gets stuck in Hiccup's shield, since she's likely to be more experienced in such matters than he. And she's definitely not happy about this pseudo-romantic encounter. Planting her boot in his face, again for leverage, she raises both battle axe and shield just in time to blunt the Nadder's attack, saving Hiccup's life as well as her own. It's another of those risky moments for Hiccup that he's fortunate to survive so he can learn more about dragons and how to train them.

The Nadder, stunned by Astrid's blow, staggers away. Lesson Two is over. Astrid angrily confronts Hiccup, who still lies on the ground. "Is this some kind of joke to you? Our parents' war is about to become ours. Figure out which side you're on." What a succinct description of the fundamental choice facing all of the teenage characters in this movie. Astrid has already made hers. She will follow the path of tradition, at least for the time being. Hiccup silently ponders the same choice. As far as he knows, the only way he can impress the girl he likes, the father whose respect he craves and the villagers to whom he is nothing but a joke, is to kill dragons.

Watching this scene from high above, on an observation platform surrounding the arena, is
Gothi, the village elder. She’s an old woman who never says a word yet will greatly influence events to come in the lives of Hiccup, Astrid, Gobber, Stoick and the entire village. What does she make of Astrid’s ultimatum and Hiccup’s lack of response? Has she already marked Hiccup as someone special, with potential as a new type of Viking leader? Or at this point in the story is she more impressed with Astrid’s conventional attitude and skills? She is and remains the most mysterious character in the movie.

Returning to the cove. Hiccup cautiously approaches the wounded, unseen Night Fury. Wide, frightened eyes peer over the top of a Viking shield, as they did over the top of a ridge when he first spotted the downed dragon several scenes ago. Has Hiccup accepted Astrid’s challenge to join their parents’ war? Has he come to kill the most dangerous dragon of all and “make his mark” in the world? Does he carry a battleaxe behind that shield? No, it’s a fish, which he tosses out into the open from between the shelter of adjoining boulders. Is the fish merely bait to lure the hungry dragon within range of a concealed weapon?

Peering out cautiously to see if the coast is clear, Hiccup makes his move, or would if his shield hadn’t gotten stuck between the boulders. He lacks the strength to dislodge it. The sour look on his face is a priceless reaction to yet another humiliation. Hiccup crawls underneath the shield. Leaving it behind, he retrieves the fish and moves forward warily. What he fails to notice is the Night Fury, crouched on top of a large boulder, watching him closely, his tail and body twitching like those of a cat about to pounce on a mouse. Positions have changed since their last encounter, when Hiccup held the high ground and was less vulnerable to attack.

Hiccup notices the dragon just in time to avoid a pounce. Or was it a conscious act of restraint by the dragon? In either case, the Night Fury approaches Hiccup slowly, his eyes riveted
on the fish held out to him. The dragon opens its mouth to take the fish, then retreats, suspecting a trap. Hiccup reveals a knife sheathed in his belt: the same knife with which he once almost cut out this dragon’s heart. Does he intend the same now, winning Stoick’s respect and Astrid’s love in the process? The dragon snarls and bares its teeth. Very carefully, Hiccup pulls out the knife, holds it away from his body, drops it to the ground and kicks it into a nearby pond. The Night Fury rises up out of its menacing crouch and stares at the Viking with bewilderment and curiosity, his previously narrow pupils now rounder and more humanlike. Little head nods, eye movements and an ear twitch beautifully convey to us his emotional reactions.

Crouching low to the ground again, the beast makes hungry noises and approaches the proffered fish. No teeth are visible this time. “Toothless? I could have sworn you had …” Hiccup comments to himself. In a flash those teeth reappear and snatch the fish from his hand. Unlike every other dragon in this film, the Night Fury has retractable teeth, possibly signifying, on some level, his superior ability to restrain his fear, anger and violence. By naming his dragon “Toothless,” Hiccup draws a parallel to himself, since neither “Hiccup” nor “Toothless” immediately suggest power or respect. By the end of the story that impression will change.

The fish disappears quickly down the hungry dragon’s gullet. Crouching again, with pupils narrowed, he stalks the boy, who instinctively retreats. Rumbling noises from Toothless tell us something about his attitude, but what? Trapped against a boulder, with nowhere to run, as he was during their first close encounter, Hiccup explains desperately that he has no more fish. Toothless scrutinizes the defenseless Viking, then regurgitates his half-eaten fish into the boy’s lap. Disgusted, Hiccup reacts the same way we would. But the dragon’s gesture is not intended as an insult. The hungry animal is sharing some of his meager meal with the unexpectedly kind
human who gave it to him.

Sitting back on his haunches, looking oddly humanlike, Toothless keenly watches the boy’s reaction. His pupils are round and friendly again. Hiccup tries to wait him out. To our amusement, Hiccup averts his eyes, avoiding the dragon’s inquisitive stare. In other words, Hiccup tries to play ignorant and fails. Toothless maintains his relentless stare, briefly glancing downward as though gesturing to the gift he gave to the boy, obviously expecting him to eat it. It’s a recognizably human moment, breaking bread for the first time with a foreigner whose cuisine you despise, not wanting to risk creating animosity by refusing that gift and insulting the giver.

Hiccup concedes defeat, takes a bite out of the slimy fish and pretends to enjoy it. Toothless is not satisfied. Swallowing by way of illustration, he wants Hiccup to do the same, which the boy does, barely keeping down the repulsive morsel. Toothless smacks his lips in mistaken empathy. He thinks Hiccup enjoyed the slightly predigested fish. Hiccup fakes a toothy smile. It’s now the dragon’s turn to reciprocate. He attempts a toothless, loony-looking grin of his own. Hiccup is surprised and impressed by the amiable effort. Formerly hostile cultures have found some common ground. Hiccup reaches out tentatively to touch his new friend. But it’s too soon for such a bold gesture, as it was the first time Rapunzel flirtatiously tried to get Flynn to tell her something about his life. Catlike ears flatten and eyes turn reptilian again, analogous to Flynn telling Rapunzel, “I don’t do backstory.” Toothless retreats, as best he can minus one tail fin, to the other side of the cove. He uses his plasma blast to warm a circle on the ground, then lays down on it, in solitude.

Overhead a bird with eggs in its nest flies away. Toothless watches it go, yearning to do the
same. The eggs are a visual reminder of family. Hiccup has an estranged father and, as far as we’ve seen, no mother. Toothless apparently has no one at all. Nor can he fly. Lowering his gaze, the dragon is surprised to see Hiccup, who has taken advantage of the dragon’s brief distraction and now sits cross-legged on the ground just a few feet distant. Toothless looks away, signaling rejection. He’s not going to make this acquaintance easy. Adjusting the position of his reclined body, he turns his back on the boy and covers his eyes with his damaged tail fin—a not-so-subtle reminder to Hiccup that he caused the injury that robbed the dragon of the power to fly. “Go away!” Toothless seems to be saying.

Thus far in this scene, John Powell’s background music has evoked a quiet wonder, matching the characters’ hesitant, painfully slow progress towards mutual understanding and friendship. Much could still go wrong, yet much has already gone right. The music emphasizes the snail-paced progression of this unprecedented acquaintance.

Hiccup silently inches closer, carefully lifting and moving himself on the palms of his hands rather than by walking or crawling. He reaches out again, this time to touch the dragon’s tail. Toothless senses the intrusion, lifts his tail and glares suspiciously at the boy. Trying to be subtle but hilariously obvious instead, Hiccup quickly jumps to his feet and saunters away, pretending that he wasn’t up to anything behind the dragon’s back. It’s as unconvincing as his “casual” approach to Astrid in Meade Hall. Hiccup walks off screen left. Toothless walks off screen right. Progress between the two is temporarily stifled by the dragon’s lingering distrust. Why should he trust the Viking who robbed him of his ability to fly?

Later in the day, Toothless hangs bat-like from a tree limb. But curiosity gets the better of him. Moving his tail fin aside, in effect looking beyond the injury inflicted on him, he peeks at Hiccup
seated at the opposite side of the cove. The boy appears small, vulnerable and lonely. But he’s doing something interesting with a stick. The music changes gears slightly, adding a recorder (I think) to its blended orchestra, heightening our sense of connection between the characters. Coincidently, a recorder resembles a stick. And as does the stick-like recorder, Hiccup’s stick produces art—a language that connects these two strangers when all else fails.

Judging from pinkish clouds in the sky above Hiccup, the scene has advanced from early afternoon to near twilight. It has been neither a quick nor an easy détente between Viking and Night Fury. Hiccup’s drawing is a portrait of the dragon’s head. Not a fierce, hideous gargoyle drawn from Viking myth or the Book of Dragons (like Mother Gothel’s fierce drawing of a man’s head, designed to frighten Rapunzel, on the tower floor in Tangled), but a more accurate, gentler rendition. The teenage Viking deliberately employs his artistic talent (something that gained him little respect from his fellow Vikings back in Berk) to gently lure his new but distrustful acquaintance into closer proximity.

Toothless appears at Hiccup’s side, the way Hiccup appeared at Toothless’s earlier. The drawing intrigues him. Wisely, the boy doesn’t overreact and scare him off. Not even glancing at his inquisitive audience, Hiccup continues to draw. Toothless is fascinated, his eyes wide with wonder, his throat making sounds somewhere between a coo and a purr. The music increases in volume as the movie approaches its central climax.

Pondering Hiccup’s drawing for a moment, Toothless lumbers away on foot. It is Hiccup’s turn now to wonder what the other guy is up to. He turns his head to see, just as Toothless previously moved aside his tail to see. It’s almost a game of hide and seek. The dragon returns with his own, tree-sized version of a drawing stick, circling wildly around the boy as he carves something in
the dirt. Hiccup’s stares in wonder, as Toothless did at Hiccup’s drawing. At one point while he
draws, Toothless turns around to look at Hiccup, who in an effort not to scare the dragon
pretends to pay no attention to the artist’s activities. In fact, to the contrary, Hiccup is fascinated.
The tree branch clouts Hiccup on the head as the dragon wheels round and round. But it’s only
an accident. No harm intended, or suspected. These two characters are growing more
comfortable with each other.

Toothless finishes his work, then stands by to watch for Hiccup’s reaction. From overhead we
see the boy at the center of a crazy maze, puzzling over what to do with it. Toothless waits
patiently outside the maze to see how Hiccup performs within it. This is *his* test for our young
hero. The music rises in volume, massed strings singing out the pulsing, clockwork rhythm of a
potentially wondrous step forward in this tentative relationship between Viking and dragon.
Hiccup ponders the swirls surrounding him. He takes a step, his foot landing on one of the lines.
Toothless lowers his head, bares his teeth, flattens his ears and snarls. Hiccup flinches
reflexively. Not in abject terror, as he once would have, but in acknowledgement that he’s
violated the rules of whatever game Toothless has invited him to play. He raises his foot and
holds it in mid-air, spreading his hands out for balance, looking like an acrobat. Every move
counts now. The dragon’s expression returns to benign. The scientist in Hiccup conducts an
experiment, repeating his previous action to see if it triggers the same reaction. Foot on the
line—Toothless doesn’t like it. Foot off the line—Toothless approves. It’s the dragon version of
Hopscotch. Step on a crack, break your mother’s back. It’s also trial and error, with each party
trusting the other sufficiently to allow for mistakes. They’re inventing the rules for a new
relationship that Vikings and dragons never before imagined.
A shot of Hiccup’s feet, from close to ground level. His skinny legs and big Viking boots enhance the dramatic effect of this learning experience. Small boy with a big responsibility. This time Hiccup steps over the line and onto an adjoining patch of ground. Toothless rewards him with a favorable reaction. Smiling warmly, the boy acknowledges the dragon’s approval.

The camera and we move in sympathy with Hiccup as he carefully works his way through the maze, avoiding every line. Powell’s metronomic music becomes joyous, a chorus of voices joining the orchestra as Hiccup virtually dances through the maze, gracefully and with increasing confidence. It’s the choreography of a new and powerful friendship. There’s nothing clumsy about him how. I would compare this extraordinary scene to Rapunzel’s village dance in Tangled, during which she not only celebrates her newfound freedom, she invites everyone else to join in that celebration and simultaneously overcomes whatever reluctance Eugene previously felt about falling in love with her. The new friendship developing between two former enemies, Hiccup and Toothless, is equally exhilarating.

Toothless and Flynn Rider begin their respective stories as reluctant, distrusted and distrusting guides for Hiccup and Rapunzel. But thanks to the growing maturity of the hero and heroine, that hostility is slowly transformed into love, for Rapunzel and Eugene, and deep friendship, for Hiccup and Toothless.

Before either he or we realize it, thanks to a camera tightly focused on his careful movements, Hiccup navigates successfully out of the maze and stands directly beside Toothless, whose breath from above ruffles the boy's hair. Hiccup turns around and looks up at the dragon, raising his right arm in an instinctive gesture of self-defense, his mouth open in awe. Despite their progress, this is still an uncertain détente.
The music fades in breathless anticipation. In a single movement, and with only a moment’s hesitation, Hiccup’s defensive arm gesture becomes one of invitation. He reaches out slowly to touch the dragon’s nose. Now it’s Toothless’s turn to react defensively. He cocks his head, squints, growls and bares his teeth. Hiccup retracts his offending hand. With part of the dragon’s maze (the puzzle he’s already solved) visible in the background, Hiccup thinks about his next move, trying to imagine what it is that makes Toothless still afraid of physical contact.

Solving that new puzzle, Hiccup bows his head, averts his gaze and closes his eyes. He extends his hand again, this time careful to stop short of making contact. It’s a courageous act, since the boy does not know how his companion will react. The dragon could easily bite off the offending hand. Instead, Toothless is surprised and fascinated. Visually prominent in a terrific profile shot of Hiccup’s brightly illuminated hand poised just inches from the dragon’s nose, Toothless bridges the gap between them, closing his eyes in a reciprocal gesture of blind trust. Contact. This is the heart of the movie, the moment towards which everything preceding it has led and the moment that shapes everything to follow.

Encouraged by the dragon’s response, Hiccup finally dares look his new friend in the face. Toothless does the same. Friendly contact has been made, but not all cultural differences have been overcome. Snorting as though the scent of a human hand were as unpleasant to him as the taste of a regurgitated fish was to Hiccup, Toothless withdraws. But without the distrust he displayed when he rejected Hiccup’s first two efforts to make physical contact. Rapunzel and Eugene too experienced moments of doubt about each other, even after they became friends. As the scene ends, Hiccup silently ponders the implications of what just happened.

Back in Berk later that evening, atop a tall observation platform with a spectacular view of
another of those northern sunsets the narrator spoke about at the start of the movie, Gobber tells his students colorful tales of his past dragon fighting days. The wooden pillars and beams surrounding this little campfire gathering are something akin to a Viking Stonehenge. Myth and tradition are being handed down from one generation to the next, through adventure stories. It's the oral equivalent of the Dragon Manual that so enthralled and frightened Hiccup.

The characters sit in a circle, roasting their food over the fire. All but Hiccup have plucked birds at the end of their roasting sticks. He has a fish instead. Birds are flying creatures, like dragons. Consciously or not, Hiccup has opted for a less dragon-like meal.

Gobber tells his young audience how he lost an arm and a leg to dragons. "I was delicious!" he jokes. Just like the dragon-like bird he eats. Most of the trainees are enthralled with his tale. Only Hiccup appears uncomfortable. Fishlegs, as usual, gets lost in the details of his mentor's story, fantasizing what it might be like to retain control over Gobber's swallowed hand, using it to attack and kill the dragon from inside. Less imaginative, Snotlout vows to avenge his mentor's losses of limb by chopping off the legs of every dragon he fights, "with my face!" That's about as impractical as Fishleg's idea. Tuffnut stakes his claim to warrior status by sporting a fake tattoo he insists is real. Ruffnut predictably challenges his brother's claim.

Like every good teacher, Gobber transforms Snotlout's passionate but nonsensical vow into a more practical piece of advice. Ripping a leg off his roasted bird to illustrate his point, he explains that wings and tails are a dragon's vulnerable spots. "A downed dragon is a dead dragon." But Hiccup draws a contrary lesson from Gobber's utilitarian transformation of Snotlout's foolhardy boast. Instead of merely absorbing and regurgitating tradition Gobber voices, he will turn tradition on its head.
Gobber departs for bed, advising his trainees to do likewise. Tomorrow they will face the first of the “big boys” in the arena, for the ultimate honor of killing a Nightmare in front of the entire village. Tuffnut brags that it’s his “destiny” to be so honored. To what else would a young Viking aspire? Despite Gobber’s admonition, the teenagers are too excited to sleep. They linger around the campfire to discuss matters further. Astrid, always a little detached from her fellow trainees, notices that Hiccup has departed. Curious about the team’s other, more pronounced loner, she spots him rapidly descending the platform, but does not follow. What is her interest in the village joke? Is she already attracted to him? Maybe. They’re the two most mature, serious-minded teenagers in the village, despite the sharp discrepancy in their skills as dragon fighters. Meanwhile, the other trainees continue bragging about themselves and insulting one another, too self-absorbed to notice Hiccup’s absence or Astrid’s curiosity about it.

Instead of heeding Gobber’s advice to rest up for tomorrow’s lesson in the arena, Hiccup heads for the blacksmith shop where he enthusiastically designs and constructs, out of the very weapons used to kill dragons, something he hopes will save Toothless from being killed. The same skills he employed to construct the catapult with which he brought Toothless down to earth are now employed to restore his ability to fly. Hiccup beats his swords into plowshares, so to speak. Maybe this tale of dragon limb-building, told in a powerful montage of images and dance music, will someday become as legendary among Vikings as Gobber’s tale of limb loss. We hear no adolescent whining from Hiccup now, only quiet focus and determination. The background music speaks for him, from design sketches for a new tail fin to the final product.

Next day, at the cove, Hiccup dumps out a large basket of fish for his new friend, who this time approaches the proffered meal with less caution than before. But cultural ignorance still presents
a few problems. Hiccup holds up a striped eel, assuming Toothless will regard it as a delicacy. Instead the dragon reacts with horror, like one of us finding a bug in our bowl of cereal. Who knew? Hiccup apologetically tosses aside the offending object and empathizes with his friend’s disapproval. Still, Hiccup was willing to eat part of a disgusting, partially digested fish in order to placate Toothless in their previous encounter. It’s Hiccup who leads the way in their détente.

Hiccup’s strategy is to divert the dragon’s attention with a tempting meal in order to slip unnoticed behind him and attach a makeshift fin to his damaged tail. Twice that tail reflexively pulls away from the boy’s touch. So Hiccup sits on it and attaches his contraption while Toothless searches the now empty basket for more food. Eventually the dragon senses unauthorized activity at his back end. He drops the basket, squints suspiciously, flexes his tail a little, and slowly spreads his enormous wings. Hiccup is pleased with his accomplishment, but with his back turned has no idea Toothless is preparing for flight. From the camera’s and our unique perspective, the dragon’s bat-like wings also appear to be Hiccup’s wings. And so they become, as Toothless launches himself into the air while Hiccup hangs on for dear life to the dragon’s now functional tail. Rousing Celtic dance music accompanies them. This is indeed a dance, as exhilarating as it is awkward for both characters.

Determined to escape from the prison-like cove, Toothless heads for the cliffs enclosing it. The metal spines of his artificial tail wing collapse together, sending dragon and reluctant passenger plunging towards the rocks. Hiccup manually re-extends the wing, causing both he and Toothless to shoot straight up into the sky and out of the cove. Only with the help of his new friend does the dragon regain his freedom. Soaring and diving at will, Toothless celebrates. “It’s working! Yes! I did it!” exclaims Hiccup, ironically echoing his exultation when he thought he’d killed a
Night Fury with his catapult. But his self-congratulations are premature, just like when he propped his foot on the presumably dead dragon and declared victory. Toothless looks back and notices the little Viking clinging to his tail. Not yet realizing his dependence on the boy, he flicks his tail and sends Hiccup careening into the pond in the middle of the cove. Without Hiccup to hold it open, the mechanical wing collapses again and Toothless ends up in the same cove from which he escaped. Hiccup emerges from the water yelling and gesturing in triumph. This was a Kitty Hawk flight in terms of distance and duration. But despite some continuing misunderstanding between the two characters, it demonstrated the validity of Hiccup’s design.

The cove in which Hiccup and Toothless get to know each other as friends and collaborators is their version of Joseph Campbell’s “Belly of the Whale” (Campbell, 74). Within its womb-like confines, which Toothless entered involuntarily and Hiccup voluntarily, boy and dragon forge an unexpected, mutually beneficial relationship. Their first flight together, one of the benefits of the new trust between them, almost frees them from the cove. Eventually they escape it together, as ecstatically as Rapunzel and Eugene free themselves from the flooded tunnel in Tangled. All four characters undergo a kind of re-birth, after which they see each other and the world differently. But until Hiccup is ready to introduce the lessons he learned in the cove to a hostile audience back home in Berk, the cove will remain for him only a fantasy of escape from his old life, not a true gateway to a larger and better one. And that won’t happen until a third character, in effect a snake in his garden for two, intrudes to disrupt his fantasy and drag him back to the real world.

“Today’s lesson is about teamwork,” Gobber announces to his recruits as another day of dragon training begins. That’s the same lesson Hiccup and Toothless are learning together at the
cove. But the team and the goal are different. A hideous Zippleback is today’s arena challenge. One of its two heads spews a flammable gas while the other one ignites it. Preceded and concealed by a some of that greenish gas, the dragon creeps out of its cage to confront six young Vikings equipped with buckets of water with which to prevent flame from reaching gas. The recruits are split into teams: Hiccup and Fishlegs, Astrid and Ruffnut, Snotlout and Tuffnut.

As usual, Fishlegs frightens himself with a recitation of grim dragon facts. In his case, too much knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Hiccup does not appreciate the ill-timed lesson and tells him to shut up. Like Fishlegs, Snotlout predictably does his thing, bragging about what terrible things he will do to the Zippleback. And just as predictably, he screws up by tossing his bucket of water at the dimly visible horns of Ruffnut’s helmet. In a fog, Vikings and dragons look alike. Typically, Tuffnut is distracted from the lurking threat of dragon attack by an urge to insult his sister and Astrid, remarking on their large rear ends. His partner, Snotlout, lamely attempts to transform Tuffnut’s insult into a flirtatious compliment of Astrid, which earns him an unappreciative punch in the mouth from the object of his affection. Ruffnut takes her revenge by slamming her bucket into Tuffnut, knocking him to the ground. There is not the slightest hint of teamwork among these groups. Taking advantage of the trainees’ lack of focus, the unseen Zippleback grabs Tuffnut and yanks him into the fog.

Astrid, as usual, is the first to recover her tactical awareness. But the Zippleback’s tail knocks both her and her partner off their feet. A terrified Tuffnut emerges from the fog, fleeing the menace within it and complaining that he’s badly injured, which is an exaggeration. A shameless braggart the night before, around the campfire, he is now a scared little boy. It’s been a quick turnaround. The last line of trainee defense is weak. Fishlegs is fixated on his diminishing odds
of survival. When one of the dragon's hideous heads emerges from the fog, he panics and douses it with water from his bucket. Unfortunately, it's the head that supplies fuel, not the one that ignites it. Fishlegs panics and runs away.

Dragon head number two joins its partner. Now *that's* teamwork! Hiccup stands alone against both. He launches his water at the correct head, but lacks the strength to get it anywhere near the target. All but one of the trainees have lived down to their shortcomings. The fog clears and the Zippleback twins advance on a retreating Hiccup, who drops his now empty, useless bucket. Afraid for his apprentice and surrogate son, Gobber yells out Hiccup's name. But he's too far away to rescue the boy, as he did from the Gronckle at the end of the first lesson.

To everyone's surprise but his own, Hiccup forces the two-headed beast to retreat back into its cage, apparently with just his voice and a few hand gestures. At the last moment he tosses a striped eel into the cell with the dragon, who is too terrified to protest or move. "Now think about what you've done," he scolds the two-headed beast, like the disapproving parent of a naughty child, as he locks the cage door. Hiccup learned this trick while trying to help, not frighten, Toothless back at the cove. His unique education with a friendly dragon helps him avoid both killing and being killed in the arena. By hiding the eel beneath his vest until ready to deploy it, and then concealing it from the other recruits and Gobber when he tosses it into the Zipplebach cage, Hiccup keeps his relationship with Toothless a secret and unintentionally creates an aura of mystery around himself.

Gobber and the others are struck dumb by Hiccup's unconventional demonstration of dragon wrangling. Fishlegs drops his bucket in astonishment. Not a word of insult from the others.
Avoiding awkward questions, Hiccup excuses himself to attend to other, unexplained matters. None of his companions would accept his explanation anyway.

Lively music accompanies Hiccup as he designs a saddle for Toothless, who when he sees it for the first time runs away. The dragon doesn’t yet associate that saddle with improving his flying ability. Hiccup pursues Toothless, holding the saddle over his head. The chase is on, but this time it’s horseplay between pals instead of terror-filled panic between strangers. Hiccup would never have chased Toothless earlier in their relationship, and Toothless would never have allowed the boy to catch him. But now the chase is more like a playful dance, echoed by the music that accompanies it.

We assume Toothless eventually allows Hiccup to mount the saddle on his back, because we next see them soaring in the air with Hiccup safely mounted in that saddle, pulling a rope attached to the dragon’s artificial tail. Contrary to what occurred during the last arena lesson, we see real teamwork now, though hardly perfection. A mistimed rope pull by Hiccup sends him plummeting into the pond and Toothless careening in the opposite direction. Even with the best of intentions, teamwork requires practice.

Hiccup designs a safety harness for the saddle, solving one problem. But another arises to take its place. Flying outside the cove, Toothless unexpectedly and deliberately plunges into a field. Dislodged again from his saddle, Hiccup turns back to see his friend rolling around blissfully in the tall grass there, probably scratching a long-nagging itch. With each flight the teammates learn more about each other.

Hiccup applies the knowledge he gained from his aborted flight with Toothless to Lesson Three of his dragon training in the arena. To avoid injuring or being injured by a Gronckle that
has already bested one of his fellow trainees, Hiccup offers him a good scratch with a fistful of the same grass that pleased Toothless. The dragon immediately rolls over and becomes docile. Hiccup’s unusual exploits in the arena continue to be observed by village elder Gothi. Other villagers join her on the platform above the arena, to watch a show unlike anything they’ve ever seen.

Hiccup becomes an object of admiration to his fellow teenagers, who crowd around him after their latest training session, eagerly asking questions he’d rather not answer instead of hurling insults he never enjoyed. He discreetly evades their curiosity. Only Astrid remains cool and distant, not quite sure what to make of the new and improved Hiccup.

Progressively replacing grass with his own hand, Hiccup scratches a very pleased Toothless the next day in the cove. When he scratches under the dragon’s chin, Toothless belly flops to the ground in a blissful trance. Hiccup gazes at his own hand in astonishment. Fingers that could barely lift a shield or a battleaxe can now fell a dragon at the merest touch.

The back-and-forth of learning by trial and error returns to the arena. Astrid fails to stop an attacking Nadder with her axe and has to leap aside to avoid its retaliation. The dragon charges Hiccup, who still looks scrawny and helpless despite the ill-suited mace in his hand. He drops the weapon. The puzzled Nadder pauses, giving Astrid another crack at him. But before she can land a mighty blow with her recovered axe, Hiccup reduces the dragon to a quivering mass of pleasure with a mere scratch under the chin. Astrid is confused, then angry at being upstaged. Hiccup seems almost embarrassed by his success. He wants to prevent harm to both Vikings and dragons, but he doesn’t want to antagonize Astrid in the process.

At Meade Hall, formerly the scene of his humiliation at the hands of his fellow trainees,
Hiccup suddenly finds himself popular. Taking a seat at a table by himself, his usual practice, he is soon surrounded by admiring teenagers, minus Astrid. The adults join in too. No longer the reigning teen celebrity, Astrid sits by herself, pissed off. What she's feeling is not quite the disgrace and isolation Hiccup endured at the start of the movie, and for most of his life before that. But it's an approximation. On the other hand, her fall from grace is something he's never experienced either, yet, because this is his first taste of popularity.

Hiccup continues experimenting to learn more about Toothless in particular and dragons in general. He employs a spot of sunlight reflected off his blacksmith hammer to keep Toothless amused, chasing a dancing patch of light on the ground like a captivated housecat. When Hiccup returns to the arena, this little science experiment pays off. A Terrible Terror, a tiny dragon with a fierce inclination to bite, attacks the nose of Tuffnut, who again underestimates his foe and overestimates himself. Hiccup comes to the rescue, coaxing the little monster back into its cage with the same spot of sunlight, this time reflected off the metal stud in his shield, that so entertained Toothless. He's re-writing the Viking Dragon Manual while preventing harm to the arena dragons and keeping his friendship with Toothless a secret.

With cruel adolescent sarcasm, Tuffnut tells Astrid that Hiccup is now a better dragon fighter than she ever was. The insult hits home, so Astrid trains even harder, but only in the traditional Viking methods of dealing with dragons. No wonder those traditions are so difficult to overthrow. Basic human pride is intertwined with them. Like many dragon fighters before her, Astrid wants bragging rights. Practicing her axe-throwing and defensive skills in the forest, away from prying eyes, she spots Hiccup passing by with a mysterious bundle in his arms. Not lingering to flirt on this occasion, as he's done in the past, he departs immediately, avoiding her.
She tries to follow, but he quickly disappears. Not only has Astrid lost her status within her peer group, she no longer enjoys the worshipful attention of the scrawny, lovesick loser from up the block. *Everyone* is learning new lessons these days.

Hiccup makes new adjustments to Toothless’s artificial tail wing while the dragon eats fish from another basket of goodies. This time the food is not necessary as a distraction. It’s just food. That fact alone is a measure of their progression as friends. Powell’s infectious dance music continues, echoing the increasing lyrical harmony of the teamwork between Viking and dragon.

More prudent this time, Hiccup tests his new equipment while Toothless is tethered to a tree stump. When we first observe them, in close-up, we *think* they’re flying freely in mid-air, until the camera zooms out to reveal the rope. Progress in the delicate art of flying as a team occurs in small steps rather than giant leaps. Hiccup the engineer conducts his latest experiment under *controlled* conditions. And one of the components he’s testing is a new foot control for the manufactured tail wing, replacing his previous hand control.

Another design revision is followed by another tethered test flight. Toothless, eager to soar the skies unfettered, is clearly annoyed with the confining rope, yet tolerates it because he knows the experiments are for his own benefit. This time, however, the tether breaks, sending dragon and boy crashing to the ground. Hiccup is left hanging upside down by the harness connected to his saddle. An unforeseen design flaw, so it’s back to the drawing board.

The disjointed worlds of cove and Berk, not yet reconciled by the hero, make dangerous contact when Hiccup, under cover of darkness, brings Toothless to the blacksmith shop for necessary adjustments to his flying gear. The dragon spots a basket resembling the one he associates with food. He sticks his snout in but finds it empty. Disappointed, he tosses it aside.
That's his little experiment in trial and error. How quickly we fall into routines, acting according to what we expect, based solely on previous experience.

The noise caused by Toothless attracts the attention of Astrid, passing by outside. Hiccup is forced to leave his work in order to get rid of the girl he otherwise wants to be near. Still tethered to Toothless by his harness, he goes outside, quickly closes the shop door behind him in order to conceal the dragon, and faces Astrid. “You’re acting weird. Well, weirder,” she tells him. If she’s developed any romantic interest in Hiccup, it’s overshadowed by jealousy and resentment. She’s not about to admit, to Hiccup or to herself, the slightest attraction to him.

Toothless is partly, though not entirely, a creature of instinct. He is to Hiccup what Flynn Rider was to Rapunzel at the beginning of Tangled. The sight of a sheep grazing outside the blacksmith shop draws his attention. Moving in the direction of that sheep, he unwittingly tugs on the harness tying him to Hiccup, jerking the boy back towards the door. Hiccup seems to levitate in midair—a bizarre phenomenon he cannot explain to Astrid. Toothless pulls harder on the harness, pulling Hiccup involuntarily back into the shop. Puzzled by his sudden, inexplicable disappearance, Astrid follows him, almost catching a glimpse of the dragon. Hiccup prudently sneaks Toothless out of the shop through a back exit. Swiftly and silently they flee the village.

It was a close call. Hiccup is not yet emotionally ready to unite his two worlds: the one traditional and disappointing, the other full of adventure and discovery, but also danger. By his actions in the arena he’s introduced some of the benefits of the latter into the former. But there will come a time of crisis when he must choose loyalty to one or the other, and acknowledge that loyalty for all to see. As Joseph Campbell described, he must bring his disparate worlds together.

Stoick’s badly damaged ship returns from battling dragons at sea. No nest was found, he
confesses to Gobber, who has a happier tale to tell. “Your parenting troubles are over with,” he declares. That news is echoed by cheerful congratulations from other villagers. “Everyone is so relieved.” “Out with the old and in with the new.” “No one will miss that old nuisance.” “The village is throwing a party to celebrate.” Stoick is confused. “He’s gone?” the Chief inquires about his son. It’s an ambiguous moment. In view of the concern he previously expressed about letting Hiccup enter dragon training, does he fear his boy got killed in the arena? Ran away from home? If either explanation is true, it puts a nasty spin on the cheerful enthusiasm of the other villagers. For an unguarded moment, even Stoick seems pleased at the thought that his incompetent son will no longer be an embarrassment to him.

Gobber toys with his old friend as though chastising him a wee bit for his ambiguous reaction to the idea of Hiccup being gone. But eventually he clarifies the situation for Stoick. Hiccup, he informs the Chief, is absent from Berk most afternoons, for some unknown reason. Aside from that little mystery, the boy has become a celebrity due to his unusual dragon-fighting skills. Stoick, assuming his son’s skills are very conventional and honorable, is thrilled.

But the skills Hiccup demonstrates at the cove are very different from what his father anticipates. After working out the kinks of saddling a Night Fury, he now concentrates on the problem of tailoring tail wing positions to specific flying maneuvers. He’s prepared a manual illustrating six of those positions, and attached it to his saddle. Basically, it’s a map of the dragon’s manual transmission. “We’re going to take this nice and slow” he tells Toothless before commencing their first untethered test flight.

The best laid plans of dragon and boy sometimes go awry. Soaring and gliding among mountain tops and low clouds, Hiccup is in control of the flight. He’s still a little shaky about
which gear suits which maneuver, but he learns quickly. Calling out “C’mon buddy!” to the first real friend he’s ever had, he adjusts the dragon’s artificial tail and tells Toothless to dive towards the sea. Skimming over the waves, they’re still in control of the flight. But a couple of glancing collisions with towering rock formations remind them, and us, they’re not yet masters of team flying. Toothless slaps Hiccup in the face with his ear, chastising the boy’s navigational mistakes, for which the dragon had to pay. Only a trusted friend would be allowed to do that. They’ve advanced a long way since their extremely tentative first touch.

Gaining confidence, the pair climb straight up, shooting past low clouds and into the deep blue sky. Hiccup is ecstatic. “This is amazing!” He starts to add, “The wind in my hair!” But “hair” changes to “cheat sheet,” and triumph into disaster. The instruction manual Hiccup had been trying to follow so closely blows away. Worse yet, as Hiccup stretches to retrieve the manual, his harness unclips and he falls out of the saddle, his foot leaving the stirrup by which he controls the dragon’s tail wing. Viking and dragon free fall towards the island far below them, neither in control of their rapid descent.

Only by keeping his head in a crisis and using the air flow against his body to maneuver himself closer to the dragon is Hiccup able to remount his saddle, regain control of the mechanical rudder, retrieve his cheat sheet and brake Toothless just in time to avoid a crash landing. Racing at breakneck speed through a perilous maze of rock towers jutting up out of the ocean, Hiccup jettisons his now worthless manual and navigates by instinct alone. Once clear of the rocks, boy and dragon react as one to their shared success. Hiccup raises his arms and lets out a mighty cheer, Toothless roars and fires a celebratory burst of plasma. But in the midst of triumph there is a humorous reminder of fallibility. Immune to the effects of his own fire,
Toothless flies right through it. Hiccup, not quite so fire-retardant, complains helplessly, “Come on!”, just before feeling its effects. For a moment he sounds like the pessimist he was in the old days. Despite their mutual triumph in aeronautics, Viking and dragon are still very different from one another. Adjusting to those difference demands constant fine-tuning.

Later, Hiccup relaxes on the ground after his victory in the air. His fire-singed cheeks and blown-back hair are the aftereffects of Toothless’s celebratory fireball. Hiccup reclines against his best friend and flying buddy, like an ordinary kid with his beloved dog. Toothless gratefully upchucks a hunk of fish for his co-pilot. But once was more than enough for Hiccup, who politely declines the unappetizing meal. This time he can do so without causing offense, which is another indication of the growing trust between them.

A flock of Terrible Terrors swoops in, attracted to the pile of fish Toothless jealously guards from them. He’s not inclined to share with strangers, only with his best friend. He warns off his dragon competitors with quinty eyes, bared teeth and a growl. Recklessly brave, one of the little guys sneaks in and steals a fish head. Another, in turn, tries to steal the head from him, but is repulsed by a blast of fire from the original thief. Even among friends within the same tribe, bickering and selfishness are common. The Terrible Terrors are not much different from Snotlout and the Twins.

A third miniature dragon tries to steal a fish while Toothless is distracted by the first two. A mismatched tug of war ensues. Toothless easily wins, laughing at his puny rival, just as Hiccup’s fellow trainees once laughed at him. The little critter rears up to fire a ball of flame at his much bigger rival. But Toothless gets off the first shot, a mini-burst straight into his rival’s mouth. The Terrible Terror staggers away, chastened. “No so fireproof on the inside,” Hiccup observes with
a touch of sarcasm. Clearly he sides with his best friend.

But Hiccup also remembers what it was like to be the runt of his tribe back home, before he became a celebrity. He shows compassion to the tiny loser, tossing the dragon one of his own fish. Gobbling it up, the grateful Terror rewards Hiccup’s kindness by snuggling under his arm. Hiccup is surprised and pleased, petting his new friend until it purrs and falls asleep, trusting the much bigger human to protect him. Astonished, Hiccup surmises, “Everything we know about you guys is wrong.” Once again, he’s revising the Vikings’ Book of Dragons.

Living two conflicting lives, one for himself and one for his village, proves exhausting for Hiccup. In his small apprentice room within Gobber’s blacksmith shop, he sits with head down on his workbench, absently playing with his drawing pencil. Inspiration for new ideas has dried up, for the time being. But the previous fruit of that inspiration lies strewn all around him, including drawings of the catapult that brought down Toothless and of the artificial tail wing that restored flight to the dragon. The drawings are an inventory of Hiccup’s changing perceptions. They are also, potentially, incriminating evidence of his betrayal of traditional Viking values.

The presence of Hiccup’s drawings of Toothless and flying equipment make the apprentice room an extension of the cove where boy and dragon became friends and teammates. Enter Stoick, with difficulty, through the small doorway. Now it’s his turn to feel like a misfit: a giant in a world too small for him, as opposed to an undersized boy (Hiccup) in a world of giants. Surprised at his father’s presence, Hiccup scrambles to conceal the evidence of his double life. He assumes Stoick came to see Gobber. Why would he come here to see Hiccup? Has he ever? Father and son have never felt comfortable together. Communication will prove difficult again, despite Stoick’s happy reasons for coming to see Hiccup.
“You’ve been keeping secrets,” Stoick accuses his son, who assumes his friendship with the Night Fury has been exposed. Hiccup stammers, unable to formulate a convincing lie. “Nothing happens on this island without me hearing about it,” declares Stoick, sounding omniscient. The boy flinches. “Let’s talk about that dragon,” Stoick demands rather than suggests. Hiccup desperately tries to explain his actions in a way that avoids casting himself as a traitor or Toothless as a foe deserving of death. When Stoick unexpectedly bursts out laughing, Hiccup is confused, unconvincingly joining in his father’s levity. He has no idea what could possibly amuse his father about him making friends with a dragon. As on previous occasions, father and son see almost nothing the same way.

“You’re not upset?” Hiccup hesitantly inquires. “I was hoping for this,” responds Stoick cheerfully. This makes no sense to Hiccup, until the misunderstanding is cleared up, at least for the boy. Stoick thinks his son has become a great dragon fighter who will finally achieve great honor when he kills his first dragon in the arena. In his enthusiasm as a proud father for the first time, the giant of a man accidently knocks the runt of a boy backwards, into a barrel. It’s a humorous measure of our hero’s predicament, because he is “over a barrel,” figuratively speaking. “All these years of the worst Vikings have ever seen. Odin, it was rough. I almost gave up on you. And all the while you were holding out on me. Oh, Thor Almighty!” The Chief’s faith is based on a false assumption.

At the beginning of the story, Hiccup yearned for fatherly respect and praise like this. But now it contradicts everything he has become. Straddling the thin line between his two worlds just got trickier. Stoick pulls up a chair, sits down, looks his son straight in the eye and tries to initiate the heart-to-heart conversation he’s avoided for years. “We finally have something to talk about.”
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He wants to hear Hiccup’s tales of triumph and glory in the dragon training arena. The young man finally gets a chance to do what Gobber did around the campfire: regale his audience with stories of adventure, courage and sacrifice. For a few awkward moments that seem an eternity to Hiccup, silence reigns between them. The son has an extraordinary tale to tell, but it’s not the one his father wants to hear. Despite Stoick’s eagerness to listen, they have nothing to talk about.

Stoick breaks the awkward silence to present Hiccup with a gift, “to keep you safe in the ring.” It’s a Viking helmet with horns, similar to Stoick’s, but with smaller horns. Hiccup is touched by this token of his father’s affection. The helmet is a proud acknowledgement of kinship. But like Toothless’s offer of a regurgitated fish, it comes with a humorous price. Hiccup strokes the prized possession, understandably pleased to receive it despite his father’s mistaken reason for giving it. The helmet, Stoick explains, is made from the breastplate of Hiccup’s deceased mother. Startled, Hiccup immediately pulls his hand away from it, laughing uncomfortably. Fondling a symbol of his mother’s breast just seems wrong to the Viking teenager. He’s no longer a baby. Stoick, by contrast, sentimentally wears the other half of that breastplate on his head, which doesn’t seem so odd considering the original owner was his wife. It’s another example of the differences between how fathers and sons view the world and everything in it.

As he did when Toothless offered him the gift of a half-digested fish, Hiccup briefly glances away in order to avoid the expectant gaze of his father, who has just presented him with an equally dubious reward. That little gesture of avoidance, repeated a number of times during the course of the movie, says so much about Hiccup. It’s part of his “Everyman” charm. Who among us wouldn’t prefer to simply avoid unpleasant encounters.

Hiccup cannot say what he’d like to tell his father, so he fakes a big yawn and pleads a need for
sleep. The goodnight between father and son is just as awkward as their breast plate discussion. Both try to sound casual and manly, avoiding sentiment. “Thanks for the, uhhh, breast hat” Hiccup says with phony enthusiasm, quickly removing his hand from it again. Leaving his son’s apprentice room, Stoick clumsily knocks over some blacksmith implements. He is as ill-suited to Hiccup’s world as Hiccup is to his. And despite Stoick’s assumption, they are no closer to mutual understanding than they were in the movie’s first scene.

Next day, in front of the Chief and all of Berk, the trainees compete for the privilege of killing a dragon the following day. The opponent is another Gronckle. Crouched with Hiccup behind one of several wooden barriers, Astrid warns her rival she intends to win the competition. He’s happy to leave the dragon-slaying honor to her. Stoick watches the competition from the gallery, Hiccup flashes him a weak smile. He’d rather be any place other than here.

True to her word, Astrid stealthily creeps from barrier to barrier, sneaking up on her prey. But when she charges the beast, in full Viking battle cry, she is shocked to see the it lying on its side, tongue lolling out of its mouth after being disarmed by Hiccup’s secret weapon: a few blissful scratches with his hand. Hiccup’s shield and axe lie on the ground nearby, discarded. But the reluctant young warrior clings cautiously to a wooden shelter along the side of the arena, just in case the Gronckle proved difficult to tame. Or is he more afraid of Astrid’s wrath than the dragon’s? Cheered by spectators, he smiles nervously and gestures sheepishly towards the helpless dragon.

Like any bad loser, Astrid throws a fit and curses her victorious rival, who ironically is also less than pleased with his achievement. Unsuccessfully attempting a quick, inconspicuous exit, he is hoisted onto the shoulders of the much bigger Fishlegs (the humiliation of being small just
never stops for our hero) and detained by Gobber. Protesting his tardiness for an appointment elsewhere, Hiccup is pinned in place again, from the opposite direction, by Astrid's battleaxe. Suspicious, she demands to know what he's late for. She's long been suspicious of his extracurricular activities. To the dismay of both finalists, Gothi declares Hiccup the winner. He's been chosen for a Viking honor he no longer wants. Even Snotlout and the Twins, not the most generous of friends in the past, celebrate his accomplishment.

Why does the village elder choose Hiccup for the honor of killing a dragon in front of the entire village? Does she mistakenly equate his dragon-fighting skills and motives with Stoick's? Or does she see in Hiccup the radical changes he has the potential to bring to his tribe and their deadliest enemy. In either case, Gothi forces Hiccup to face a choice he's scrupulously avoided until now: confront his father and the entire village with the fact that he's made peace with a dragon, or separate himself from his tribe forever. In Cressida Cowell's original Dragon stories, Hiccup's grandfather, Old Wrinkley, seems a fool yet is also a wise elder who accurately predicts something special and untraditional in Hiccup's future. Gothi is the movie's version of Old Wrinkley, though she never verbally articulates her vision for Hiccup. Her silence adds to her mystery, and to my speculation.

If looks could kill, Astrid's reaction to Gothi's choice would annihilate Hiccup. Cheered by his formerly hostile fellow trainees, by his mentor Gobber, by his father and now by the entire village for an accomplishment he no longer wishes to claim, envied and despised by the girl he's crazy about, Hiccup has absolutely nothing to celebrate. Yet in spite of tremendous emotional pressures pulling him in the opposite direction, he courageously remains true to his best friend and to his new moral values.
Hearing his father, at last, proudly proclaiming “That’s my boy!”, Hiccup reacts without enthusiasm to the prospect of killing his first dragon, “Yeah. Yes. I can’t wait. I am so …” Returning to the cove later that day, Hiccup completes the sentence he began in the arena: “Leaving!” In order to save his new friend and remain faithful to his new principles, he is ready to give up everything else: family, friends, fame and the increasingly remote possibility of romance with Astrid. He carries his personal belongings in a basket. “Looks like you and me are taking a little vacation—forever,” he tells Toothless, who is nowhere in sight. If he flees the world of Vikings with Toothless, Hiccup cannot fulfill his heroic journey in the terms described by Bettelheim and Campbell. He and Toothless will take their exile mentality with them when they leave. And if we think forward to the effect a similar decision has on Hiccup’s mother, in *How to train Your Dragon 2*, the seriousness of Hiccup’s choice becomes clear. Whether he realizes it or not at this critical juncture in the story, Hiccup needs to confront his father and all of Berk about his new relationship with dragons, just as Rapunzel must somehow return to the tower for a final showdown with Mother Gothel in *Tangled*.

If confronting a Night Fury for the first time was scary, imagine the terror of facing the fury of a jealous, suspicious and furious Astrid. Sitting on a boulder, sharpening the blade of her axe, she obviously followed her rival from Berk to the cove. Her presence in his secret refuge comes as a shock to Hiccup. He tries to act casual, but she isn’t fooled for a moment. Astrid stalks Hiccup while she interrogates him, rudely throwing him to the ground and stepping on him, refusing to believe his lame explanation of how he acquired his dragon skills. Instead, she begins to search the cove for the truth he won’t admit. Afraid she might find Toothless, Hiccup sacrifices himself for the absent dragon by literally placing himself in Astrid’s hands, to be dragged back to the
village to confess the phony "truth" that he's been secretly making "outfits" such as the one he's currently wearing. But that dubious explanation does not satisfy his inquisitor.

Refusing to return home without discovering the secret of Hiccup's mysterious absences and unconventional dragon-fighting skills, Astrid grabs his wrist, bends it painfully backwards and forces him to the ground. "Why would you do that?" Hiccup reasonably protests her unreasonable violence. It's one of the many logical, humorous observations he makes throughout the movie, implicitly challenging irrational human behavior. Not in a reasonable mood, Astrid kicks him and, for good measure, drops the handle of her heavy battleaxe on his less-than-muscle-bound stomach. "That's for everything else," she explains, referring to her humiliating defeat in the arena. She shows all the signs of growing up to be a fierce, uncompromising enforcer of tradition, in the manner of Stoick.

Despite the threat of exposure she poses, Astrid unwittingly saves Hiccup from abandoning one of his contradictory worlds in favor of the other. If Hiccup doesn't return to Berk to share Joseph Campbell's "boon" with his fellow Vikings and the dragons they currently fear and hate, he cannot complete his heroic journey. By fleeing with Toothless, he would shirk his responsibilities and avoid difficult decisions. What if Rapunzel had completely withdrawn into her fantasies (her paintings) about the world outside her tower instead of venturing out into the real thing?

If Hiccup cannot or is unwilling to defend himself, Toothless can and will. From the other side of the cove he roars in anger and charges to the rescue of his beleaguered friend, making Hiccup's life even more complicated than it was. "Oh, man!" he whines. Ironically, the same girl who just abused him for defeating her in the arena and lying about how he did it now comes to
what she mistakenly believes is his rescue. She hurls Hiccup once more to the ground, orders him to run away and raises her axe to fend off their attacker. However mistaken she is about Toothless in particular and dragons in general, Astrid is brave and honorable. She is prepared to do in this scene what Stoick will do at the end of *How to Train Your Dragon 2*—sacrifice her life to save Hiccup’s. But Hiccup, equally brave and honorable, is willing to do the same for both of his friends. He pushes Astrid and her battleaxe aside while blocking Toothless from pouncing on and surely killing her. “She’s a friend!” he tells the agitated dragon. “You scared him,” he explains to Astrid. “I scared *him*?” she responds, betraying her fear and misunderstanding of the Night Fury. It has never occurred to her that a dragon could be afraid of a Viking.

After the combatants calm down, Hiccup formally introduces them to one another. Toothless proves the partial irony of his name (he *can* react with violence, but doesn’t always) by baring his teeth. Influenced by hundreds of years of Viking tradition and myth, Astrid flees. Disgruntled by the girl’s unfriendly reaction, Toothless shrugs and walks away. No détente this time. “We’re dead,” Hiccup remarks to himself, taking refuge in his usual humor. He assumes Astrid will tell the entire village about his betrayal and the dragon’s location. Thinking a step ahead of both Toothless and Astrid, he summons the dragon back, knowing they have to take action to prevent disaster. Defying hundreds of years of dragon and Viking experience, Hiccup will attempt to make peace between two creatures who are much more comfortable regarding each other as mortal enemies.

Jumping over a log as she flees the Night Fury, Astrid suddenly finds herself airborne, clutched in the dragon’s talons. Screaming in terror and convinced she is about to die, she is surprised and relieved to be dropped in the high branches of a tall tree, where she will, Hiccup hopes, have to
listen to reason. But she’s as stubborn as Stoick and most other Vikings. Refusing to hear another of what she regards as Hiccup’s lies, she grudgingly allows him to show her his truth. Slapping his hand away when he offers to help her onto his saddle, she climbs aboard herself, sitting behind him on the dragon’s back. Toothless is not thrilled about it either. Hiccup is barely in control of these mutually hostile forces. He is Rapunzel mediating between Maximus and Eugene. Or, in less fanciful terms, he is President Jimmy Carter negotiating between Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin at Camp David.

Astrid demands to be returned to the ground. Hiccup obliges, patting Toothless on the head and requesting a gentle descent. But Toothless has his own agenda, part of which is to teach Astrid a lesson for being hostile. Using the tree as a springboard, he launches himself and his passengers skyward with tremendous velocity. Hiccup tries to excuse the dragon’s action. “He says he’s not usually like this.” But that’s not likely what Toothless is thinking at the moment. Hiccup sounds like President Merkin Muffley trying to mediate between a drunken Soviet Premier Kissoff and his own, fanatically anti-communist military staff in Dr. Strangelove. The fate of two worlds may depend on his success, and on Hiccup’s.

Proving his friend a liar, Toothless rolls onto his back and plunges towards the sea, dousing Astrid three times in icy water before shooting back up into the sky. Hiccup tries to reason with him. “We need her to like us!” Instead the dragon spins repeatedly in mid-air, eliciting another scream from his female passenger. “Thank you for nothing, you useless reptile,” Hiccup complains, putting his usual sarcasm to good use by speaking truth to power. Like several earlier incidents, including the ear slap he received for poor navigation and the regurgitated fish he declined to eat, this insult proves that the friendship between dragon and Viking is solid. They
can defy and berate each other without risking an end to their friendship, which they certainly could not do at the beginning of their acquaintance.

A barrel-roll plunge towards the sea elicits an apology from a humbled Astrid. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Just get me off this thing!” Her contrition is apparently what Toothless wanted to hear, as was the case when Hiccup earlier expressed regret for injuring the dragon with his catapult. Spreading his wings, Toothless slows abruptly, adjusts course, and glides serenely towards a gorgeous sunset. He is teaching his reluctant passenger a lesson.

Recovering from terror, Astrid raises her head, opens her eyes and gazes in wonder at the magnificent sights afforded to her by flying on a dragon’s back. She, Hiccup and Toothless float among multicolored clouds. She reaches up and literally touch them. Soon she relishes the experience, as Hiccup and Toothless did during their first successful flight together. Toothless performs a full somersault, gently this time, serenely gliding through one of the clouds and emerging from the other side into a night sky. We’ve jumped forward in time. Our trio has been flying for hours. Awestruck by the sight of northern lights appearing so close it seems she could almost touch them, Astrid gently places her arms around Hiccup’s chest. It’s a barely conscious move on her part, but he certainly notices it, with pleasure. The hair of both teenagers flutters gently in the wind, reflecting their shared experience. It’s a nice touch by the animators.

Toothless brings his passengers back to their home village, giving Astrid a view of Berk she’s never imagined. A backward glance and grin from the dragon signals to us that he knows exactly what he’s doing. He’s the teacher now, training a Viking to see things in a different way. Hiccup’s words alone would never have convinced Astrid. She needed the experience. Astrid wraps her arms around Hiccup and hugs him, deliberately this time. They both smile.
Re-discovering her voice, Astrid confesses “All right, I admit it. This is pretty cool. It’s amazing. He’s amazing.” She reaches down to pat Toothless on the side of his head. He acknowledges the friendly gesture with a glance in her direction.

Even though Hiccup acted sincerely tried to mediate between hostile forces at the start of this scene, a case can be made that by taking Astrid on a wild, then gentle ride, Toothless fulfills the boy’s secret wishes. Another case of fairy tale wish-fulfillment. Through his mythical dragon, Hiccup proves his courage, intelligence, scientific curiosity, creativity and compassion. He also gets a shot at the girl who never paid attention to him before their “amazing” flight together.

After facing her indifference for so long, Hiccup perhaps subconsciously enjoys shocking her, demonstrating his mastery of dragon flying, a skill she does not yet possess, while she screams bloody murder and clings to him for dear life. Only after that bit of shock and awe does he, through his dragon, allow her to enjoy a more relaxed, serene version of the same activity. On a conscious level, of course, he tries to reign in Toothless during the wild part of their flight. But he is not displeased with the end result. If Toothless and all dragons represent whatever currently passes for the old concept of the id, Astrid, like Stoick, embodies the old superego. Hiccup plays the mediating ego in the middle, just as Rapunzel did between Maximus and Flynn Rider.

But as in Tangled, balance in anything is never easy to maintain. Astrid drags Hiccup back down to earth by reminding him that tomorrow he’s scheduled to kill a dragon in the arena. “Don’t remind me,” he tells her, preferring the fantasy of friendship and flying to the reality of uncompromising antagonism back in Berk. But dragon society too has its entrenched traditions. Toothless seems to react with alarm when Astrid reminds Hiccup of his unpleasant duty back home. In fact, however, the Night Fury flies into a cloudbank to conceal his human passengers
from the uncompromising traditionalists within his own tribe. A flock of dragons, each carrying
food stolen from Berk, surrounds our trio, flying in the same direction. Toothless, Hiccup and
Astrid get caught up in a ritual as old and inflexible as dragon training and vying for the privilege
of killing a dragon in the arena, before the assembled villagers of Berk.

Hiccup and Astrid are confused about what’s happening. In their present situation they are
completely dependent on the good will of Toothless as he was on Hiccup’s good will back at the
cove. “You gotta get us outta here, bud,” Hiccup pleads, laying his hand on the dragon’s head.
But Toothless shrugs it off and continues flying in formation with his fellow dragons. Is he the
helpless disciple of a ritual that will prove detrimental to his Viking friends? Attracting the
hostile gaze of a passing Zippleback, Astrid wonders out loud if she and Hiccup are just two
more prey being hauled in by their traditional enemies. As the dragons effortlessly wing their
way through a maze of rock towers leading to their nest, Astrid once more grips Hiccup around
his chest, but this time out of fear rather than affection. Equally concerned about their
predicament, Hiccup doesn’t even notice her embrace. Romance is the last thing on their minds
right now.

Entering the dragons’ nest deep inside a volcano, Hiccup reacts from old habit. He remarks, a
little tactlessly, that his father would give almost anything to know about this place. The Chief
searched for it by ship earlier in the movie, and failed to find it. Hiccup has no intention of
betraying the dragons’ nest to Stoick. But for a moment he echoes his father’s traditional Viking
point of view. And if Hiccup is still, at this late date, capable of misinterpreting dragon society,
imagine how easy it would be for the other members of his tribe to do the same. Peacemaking
through mutual understanding is a long, difficult process. Sometimes reverting back to the old
ways of perception is just easier and more emotionally satisfying. Rapunzel too had her moments of doubt about Eugene at the end of their campfire scene in the forest.

Dragons perch on rocky ledges everywhere inside the volcano. Incoming members of the tribe drop their prey into the steam-shrouded, red-glowing volcanic pit. Protecting his cargo, Toothless lands behind a boulder and hides his two Viking passengers from the other dragons, just as Hiccup hid Toothless from other Vikings. Taking that loyalty too much for granted, Hiccup comments with his old sarcasm, “It’s satisfying to know that all our food is being dumped down a hole.” He’s rushing to judgment. Imagine if Toothless had witnessed a dragon fighting session in the arena. Would his interpretation have been any more generous?

If Hiccup and Astrid were to leave the dragon lair at this moment, they would do so with a false impression of the dragons’ careless waste of food and cruel insensitivity towards the needs of Berk, which according to Stoick must stockpile that food to get through the tough winter ahead. But maybe Toothless has brought the two young Vikings here to teach them a lesson about what his kind must do in order to survive.

A Gronckle, perhaps too young to know better, hovers unsteadily over the pit after dropping his regurgitated offering of fish. An enormous beast we come to know as the Red Death hurtles up through the steam, grabs the hapless Gronckle in its jaws and returns to the pit. If this dragon is another manifestation of the id, its appetite is unrestrained, completely out of balance, as blindly violent as the volcanic hellhole from which it emerged. Mentally, the giant is an infant, solely concerned with satisfying its own immediate needs, even to the extent of cannibalism.

All the other dragons observing from their rocky perches pull back out of sight. No one wants
to be the monster’s next meal. The creature resurfaces, lured by the scent of either a rare Night Fury or an even rarer human. Recognizing the danger to all of them, Hiccup urges Toothless to flee, which they do just in time to avoid getting chomped. The other dragons follow their lead, until the cavern exit resembles a frenzied bat cave. One unlucky Zippleback gets caught and eaten on the way out. The Red Death is the ultimate dragon of Viking myth and our nightmares. It’s the wolf that eats Little Red Riding Hood and the witch that almost eats Hansel and Gretel.

As our trio returns to the safety of the cove, Astrid offers her interpretation of what they witnessed inside the volcano. The dragon lair, she contends, is like a beehive. The Red Death is the Queen who controls the other dragons. She wants to return to Berk with Hiccup and reveal these facts to Stoick. One glorious ride on the back of a friendly dragon does not necessarily eradicate the prejudices of a lifetime. After one bad experience, she’s ready to betray Toothless.

Uncertain about what he saw in the volcano, Hiccup nevertheless resists the temptation to follow Astrid’s advice. He knows his father’s hostility towards dragons is uncompromising. He pleads with Astrid not to reveal the existence of Toothless, whom he’s convinced Stoick would kill. She argues with him, pitting the historical Viking crusade to find and exterminate the nest of their arch enemy with Hiccup’s misplaced devotion to a “pet dragon.” “Are you serious?!” Walking away from Astrid in dejection, Hiccup turns back to face her squarely, answering her challenge with a firm “Yes.” Pessimistic about her response, he turns away again, sadly resigned. He’s back to the unappealing dilemma he faced before their flight together. Embrace his father’s way of seeing things or fly away forever with Toothless. But now it’s Astrid’s turn to surprise Hiccup. “Okay. Then what do we do?” This is her big moment of crisis and decision. She turns her back on the Chief, her tribe and hundreds of years of Viking custom in order to ally herself
with Hiccup and Toothless. It’s the equivalent of Eugene turning down Rapunzel’s offer to return his satchel in the gondola. More to the point, it echoes Hiccup’s original decision not to kill Toothless and instead set him free.

Hiccup needs time to “figure something out.” Astrid grants him that time, which is more respect than he’s ever received from anyone other than Toothless. In a sense, Hiccup and Astrid help each other in this scene. He rescues her from backsliding into fear and intolerance of dragons. She gives him the time and moral support he needs to prepare for his heroic test in the arena. That test is not to slay a Nightmare, as Stoick and most of the villagers anticipate, but to refrain from doing so and to convince his fellow Vikings that dragons should be treated as equals.

A dose of humor at the end of this scene reminds us that life is always full of contradictions. Astrid punches Hiccup in the arm, sufficiently hard to cause modest pain. “That’s for kidnapping me” she scolds him. Hiccup looks for sympathy from Toothless, who merely shrugs. Satisfying his thirst in the cove pond is more urgent than his friend’s budding love life. And since he now trusts Astrid, he no longer feels a need to charge to Hiccup’s defense, as he did when she bullied him earlier. Besides, Astrid quickly atones for the punch by following it with a kiss on Hiccup’s cheek, “for everything else.” He flinches, thinking she’s going to punch him again. Figuring her out won’t be easy. With a shy smile more typical of Hiccup’s behavior around her in earlier scenes, Astrid departs. Their developing relationship will no doubt be as complicated as anything between Vikings and dragons.

Hiccup watches her go, his expression switching from bewilderment to pleasure. Toothless approaches, glancing from the departing Astrid back to Hiccup and making an inquisitive sound
as if to ask, “What’s up with you two?” “What are you lookin’ at?” responds Hiccup, annoyed at the intrusion. Only a moment ago he solicited the dragon’s sympathy. Now Toothless is just an irritating third wheel. Hiccup, for the moment, is more interested in his potential romance with Astrid than in his friendship with Toothless and his big decision about what he will do tomorrow in the arena. As for Astrid, her punches have changed from punishing, before her amazing ride on Toothless, to playful and even flirtatious. Like Rapunzel and Eugene, these two characters have achieved a level of trust and affection they certainly did not enjoy previously.

Colorful banners advertise the big day at the arena. A huge crowd of villagers cheer for Hiccup. What a reversal since the first scene. Stoick, standing between larger-than-life stone statues depicting Viking ferocity, and above a sea of horned Viking helmets, proudly proclaims, “Well, I can show my face in public again.” Tradition is everywhere, all of it adding to Hiccup’s enormous burden, since he must rip that pride from his father’s heart and sacrifice his own glory in order to accomplish the greater goals of protecting his best friend and making peace between Vikings and dragons.

We are reminded of the humiliation Hiccup formerly experienced throughout Berk when Stoick jokes about it. He declares that a short time ago he would have dismissed as insane anyone who told him that “Hiccup would go from being, well, uh, being Hiccup to placing first in dragon training.” Hiccup’s name alone was once synonymous with incompetence, failure and shame. Yet Stoick believes he’s celebrating his son’s achievements, not belittling him. Which helps us appreciate the enormity of what Hiccup is about to sacrifice for his new beliefs.

Like a gladiator preparing for battle, Hiccup waits in a side room just off the arena. An iron gate overhead lends the place a prison cell atmosphere. Emotionally speaking, it is a prison.
Hiccup stands alone, clutching the helmet that is a gift from his father, a memorial to his mother and a symbol of tribal honor. He listens silently to the echoing voice of Stoick declare with pride, "Today my son becomes a Viking. Today he becomes one of us!" Trapped between all that pressure to be "one of you guys," which was once his greatest wish, and his dedication to saving Toothless and to bringing about peace between dragons and Vikings, Hiccup looks out at an arena ringed with cheering villagers. This is their Roman Colosseum. They expect their champion to slay the lion, or the dragon, or whatever the designated enemy happens to be.

"It is essential that the parent identify strongly with his child of the same sex for the child’s identification with him to prove successful" (Bettelheim, 206). Stoick failed to do so early in the story. Perhaps as a consequence, Hiccup pursued his own, contrary vision of right and wrong. Sometimes alienation, pain and rebellion produce something positive, but only if the victim has the strength and intelligence to make it so. In *How to Train Your Dragon 2* we will encounter a villain who failed in that heroic quest.

Astrid warns Hiccup to be careful with the dragon he’s about to face. "It’s not the dragon I’m worried about," he replies, referring to the crowd in general and his father in particular. She asks him what he’s going to do—the same question that went unanswered at the end of their previous scene. Hiccup replies firmly, "Put an end to this. I have to try." The time for deception and evasion is over. Hiccup’s contrary worlds are about to collide. He will reveal the truth of his revolutionary change of heart and face the consequences. Placing complete faith in Astrid, he asks her to protect Toothless from Viking hostility if "something goes wrong," which is his euphemistic way of saying, "if I die." Astrid promises to do so, asking Hiccup in return, "Just promise me it won’t go wrong." In that simple request she declares her feelings for him. He
opens his mouth to reply, but is interrupted by Gobber announcing it’s time for battle. Like the long-delayed first kiss between Rapunzel and Eugene, the romance between hero and heroine in *How to Train Your Dragon* will have to wait.

Hiccup and Astrid exchange a last look of solidarity before Hiccup dons his helmet and enters the arena. Superficially it looks like he’s girding himself for a traditional battle between Viking and dragon. Instead, he’s girding himself to stop a war between those traditional foes. Without donning his battle gear, he cannot disarm in front of his intended foe and the Viking spectators.

From the crowd’s point of view, which we share in an extreme long shot, Hiccup looks very small, almost childlike, as he enters the arena. Because he faces two enemies, one of which presently cheers him, he appears to us especially vulnerable. Hiccup stops at the weapons stand and chooses his equipment: a shield and a short knife, the latter identical to the one with which he once intended to cut out Toothless’ heart and later kicked into a pond to signal his peaceful intent to the same dragon. He knows that gesture worked with a Night Fury. He hopes it will work with a Nightmare. Stoick, anticipating a conventional battle, casually comments to Gobber, “I would have gone for the hammer.” Spoken by a powerful giant of a man who still doesn’t really understand his physically weak but emotionally strong and morally courageous son.

Bracing himself with a deep breath, Hiccup signals his readiness. The crowd grows quiet with anticipation. The massive cell door opens and a Nightmare bursts into the arena, already in flames. Frantically searching for an escape route, it spews fire at the spectators, who adroitly dodge the same. Finding no way out, the dragon turns its anger towards the one Viking inside the arena. It stalks Hiccup, who prudently retreats.

Then the unexpected happens, from the point of view of both dragon and spectators. Hiccup
drops his knife and shield to the ground, rejecting hundreds of years of Viking heritage.

Extending his hand in a calming manner and speaking softly, he reassures the Nightmare, “I’m not one of them.” He might as well have said, “I don’t believe in Odin.” Either way, his village audience is shocked. He removes and tosses aside his helmet, symbolically defying his father and, from Stoick’s perspective, desecrating the memory of his mother. It’s a bold, revolutionary and dangerous course of action he pursues. Surprised, the dragon pauses.

*How to Train Your Dragon* is a fantasy, a fairy tale, emotionally and psychologically and morally insightful but not to be taken too literally. Hiccup is not an innocent child trying to make friends with an actual alligator, shark or tiger. The Nightmare he tries to befriend is an untamed part of himself and his audience. It is a monster capable of being a friend.

“Stop the fight,” orders Stoick. “No! I need you all to see this,” Hiccup contradicts him.

“They’re not what we think they are. We don’t have to kill them.” The dragon appears mesmerized—docile. The spectators are befuddled. Demonstrating the pivotal role leadership can play in public attitude, they turn towards Stoick for a cue as to how they should react. He gives them a clear answer. “I said stop the fight!” he roars, slamming his preferred weapon, a mighty hammer, against the metal railing separating spectators from combatants. If at this critical moment Stoick were capable of seeing Hiccup’s accomplishment for the amazing thing it is, he might have swayed the pliable crowd to accept or at least consider a new way of thinking. But he’s not, so they don’t. All of his belated paternal pride was rooted in the belief that Hiccup had finally made a success of himself in conventional Viking terms. When that turns out not to be the case, he feels betrayed. His original disapproval of Hiccup from the beginning of the movie returns, even stronger than before, as bitter resentment and anger.
Hiccup staked his life on Stoick's ability to understand and appreciate what he was doing. Failing that, Stoick's anger now endangers the boy. Startled out of its docility by the Chief's booming voice, the Nightmare attacks Hiccup. Its pupils, which had widened in response to the boy's peaceful approach, narrow again as it too, like Stoick, succumbs to old, violent, primitive habits. Just as Toothless is a reflection of Hiccup's perceptions, the Nightmare echoes Stoick's fury at his son. He snaps at, chases and fires blasts of flame at the fleeing boy, who reacts to being attacked with sensible fear rather than traditional Viking bravado.

From far away, Toothless senses imminent danger to his friend. Without the assistance of his co-pilot, he claws his way out of the cove, something he was unable to do earlier when he was motivated solely by his own welfare. He half flies/half gallops towards Berk. Meanwhile, both Astrid and Stoick rush to Hiccup's rescue. The Nightmare may be symbolic of a father's rage against a disobedient son, but on a conscious level Stoick would never indulge such a murderous impulse. Astrid, prying her way under a locked gate, effectively distracts the Nightmare with one of the weapons Hiccup refused to use, but by doing so deflects the dragon's rage back on herself. Stoick in turn rescues her. All alliances are in flux now. The Nightmare pins Hiccup to the ground with his enormous claws and is on the verge of killing him.

Toothless charges into the arena with an ear-splitting battle-cry, melting the iron railings of the spectator stands with a blast of plasma flame. He both defies and betters Stoick's hammering of those same railings moments ago. Placing himself between Hiccup and the Nightmare, he fends off the bigger dragon. Hiccup in turn tries to rescue Toothless, ordering his friend to flee as hundreds of Vikings drop into the arena to attack the Night Fury. But Toothless, misperceiving the invading horde as a threat to Hiccup, refuses to leave. Stoick sees this as an opportunity to
attack the Night Fury, whom he probably thinks is a threat to his son. Confusion reigns.

Toothless easily overpowers the Chief and is about to incinerate him when Hiccup begs his friend to stop. It’s an impossible dilemma for the boy. He gazes with painful guilt at the suddenly passive, trusting Toothless, knowing he’s sealed the dragon’s doom in order to save Stoick.

Toothless is overwhelmed and subdued by a swarm of Vikings who pounce on him and seal his fire-breathing mouth. Hiccup pleads “Don’t hurt him!” and tries to go to his friend’s defense. But Astrid wisely restrains him. She knows he cannot win this battle, in this arena. Stoick orders Toothless imprisoned with the other dragons. Hiccup, Stoick, Toothless and Astrid all perform with the noblest of intentions in this scene, yet somehow they all end up opposed to one another.

A door opens. Stoick hurls Hiccup into Meade Hall, the symbolic center of Viking society and heritage, in order to vent his anger at the boy in private, away from the humiliating scrutiny of other villagers. It’s a setting also chosen by the Chief to enhance the shame he expects Hiccup to feel for betraying their tribe. Meade Hall is a veritable museum of Viking history.

“I should have known. I should have seen the signs” Stoick berates himself. In other words, his recently expressed confidence in Hiccup was paper thin all along. Desperate to save Toothless from confinement and death, Hiccup pleads for his dragon to be spared. Stoick is morally outraged that his son is more concerned about the life of a dragon than “the people you almost killed!” But that dragon “was just protecting me! He’s not dangerous!” contends Hiccup. Stoick counters with a sweeping historical indictment of all dragons. “They’ve killed hundreds of us!” Hiccup fires back in kind: “And we’ve killed thousands of them! They defend themselves! That’s all!” This is the film’s long-delayed confrontation between father and son. There is great passion in the voices of both characters. They could be referring to European immigrants and
Native Americans, Israelis and Palestinians, Christians and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, capitalists and communists. Pick your time and place, there's always an implacable conflict somewhere, with both sides claiming to occupy the moral high ground.

Hiccup is the voice of understanding and peace: a little naïve, to be sure, but courageously standing up to a less imaginative, more popular, less forgiving voice. Perhaps for that reason, Hiccup is often framed in this scene by a stream of light while Stoick is framed by darkness. It's not that Stoick is inherently ignorant or cruel. His reasoning has solid historical roots. But to follow his way of thinking is to be locked into an endless cycle of violence and revenge. Hiccup offers a new way of perception and behavior.

Committed now to explain rather than conceal his new world view, the fruits of his experiences in the magical cove, Hiccup reveals the terrible threat dragons face if they fail to bring back to their nest enough food to satisfy the ravenous appetite of "something else. It's a dragon like you've never seen." But the only thing Stoick hears in that plea is that his son has located the dragons' nest. Astrid was right. Vikings have coveted that information for generations. Stoick cares nothing about the plight of the dragons in that nest, plagued by a giant who threatens to devour them if they don't feed his colossally selfish appetite. He only wants to exterminate them. He's Colonel Walter Kurtz, in Apocalypse Now, advocating "Drop the Bomb! Exterminate them all."

Realizing his mistake, Hiccup pleads ignorance about the location of the nest, claiming that only a dragon can find it. Unwittingly, he's betrayed Toothless. The great debate is over. Rudely shoving his son aside, Stoick heads for the exit, eager to renew the crusade at which he failed during his last voyage. Hiccup continues to argue, insisting his father "can't win this one"
because the true enemy is something neither dragons nor Vikings can conquer alone. In a sense, a new standard of absolute evil, a monster that devours all, has been substituted for the ultimate evil Vikings and dragons saw in each other. The Red Death embodies selfishness, greed and ruthlessness beyond all boundaries. It is the ultimate in immaturity.

Trailing after his father, Hiccup demands, “For once in your life, would you please just listen to me!” Years of rejection, disrespect and frustration are poured into those words. Yet Hiccup channels his pent-up anger into a just cause. If he were weak or shallow, Hiccup might even welcome his father’s death at the hands of a the Red Death at this low point in their relationship, as revenge for yet another round of humiliation and the imprisonment of his best friend. But he rises above those dark, patricidal urges. Unfortunately, Stoick does not reciprocate. Roughly pushing Hiccup to the floor, the Chief figuratively slaps him with the ultimate rejection. “You’re not a Viking. You’re not my son.” With that he turns away from the boy and exits the Hall.

Pausing outside the Hall to take a deep breath and recover from his emotional break with Hiccup, he presses onward. It wasn’t easy for him to do what he did. But he did it. Note, however, that the Hall door he slams shut behind him bounces back just a crack, perhaps symbolically leaving a sliver of hope for a father/son reconciliation.

The excitement and spectacle of war preparations is as intoxicating in this fantasy as it sometimes is in real life. It’s like a scene from the first days of World War One, when many populations celebrated marching parades of soldiers before actual battles commenced and the casualties started to mount up. The whole village performs as a unified team, transporting weapons down to a fleet of ships in the harbor. The prow of the first of those weapons is decorated with a carved dragon’s head. An image of the Vikings’ greatest enemy is their chosen
symbol of *Viking* ferocity. Vikings have incorporated dragons, or a mythical version of dragons, into the way they see themselves. They’ve become what they hate.

Toothless is chained and strapped to the bow of Stoick’s vessel. He becomes the involuntary figurehead for the ship leading the crusade against his own kind. He struggles in vain against his restraints. On the dock above the harbor, family members watch their relatives depart. *Far* above that dock, Hiccup watches helplessly as his best friend is hoisted aboard his father’s ship. “Set sail,” Stoick orders, “We head for Hellheim’s Gate.” *Hell* is the operative word, since its inhabitants have been damned by all Vikings, save one, since time immemorial. Stoick glances up at his son, standing high above his father yet appearing small and powerless. Then he turns back to his sacred mission. Walking past Toothless, Stoick quietly speaks to the dragon, “Lead us home ... Devil.” Reduced to a mythical embodiment of pure evil, Toothless is to be the unwilling instrument of his own tribe’s destruction.

From a lofty perch approximating the broad, detached perspective he’s gained since the beginning of his journey, Hiccup watches his father’s fleet sail away. Even after they’re out of sight he remains, frozen in place, feeling dejected and useless, but not quite as alone as he used to be. Our initial view of Hiccup, by himself, changes to reveal Astrid standing behind him. She approaches. They stand side by side, overlooking the wide, empty ocean. “It’s a mess,” Astrid remarks. “You must feel horrible. You’ve lost everything: your father, your tribe, your best friend.” What a succinct and painful inventory of Hiccup’s failures and sacrifices. Is she being deliberately cruel? Hiccup thinks so. “Thank you for summing that up,” he replies, with the same defensive sarcasm he employed in the first scene, when Gobber made a similarly hurtful remark.

Hiccup wonders out loud if things might have turned out better for everyone if he had killed
Toothless in the first place. After his failure to create peace between Vikings and dragons, he doubts the value of *everything* he’s learned since sparing the Night Fury’s life. In other words, he’s beginning to yield to his father’s uncompromising, traditional Viking world view. Until Astrid challenges him. “Yup. The rest of us would have done it. So why didn’t you?” Hiccup hesitates, so she increases the pressure. “Why *didn’t* you?” He avoids a direct answer, feeling too beaten down to recall what was once so important to him but now seems pointless. “That’s not an answer,” she further chides him. By nagging Hiccup, Astrid supplies him with strength to overcome his crisis of faith in himself.

“Why is this so important to you?” Hiccup responds, annoyed at Astrid for digging up a painful memory, and not understanding why she would add to his already heavy burden. “Because I want to remember what you say, right now,” she explains with stunning directness. The once fierce young warrior-in-training, the girl with a belt of what looks like tiny dragon skulls around her metal-studded skirt, deliberately provokes a resurgence of courage and determination in the boy who once bravely stopped her from trying to kill Toothless, stopped Toothless from surely killing her and took her on the most amazing, mind-opening journey of her life. She knows this moment is critical for Hiccup, for Toothless, for all Vikings and for all dragons. She now possesses the same broad overview Hiccup has had for some time. But Hiccup doesn’t yet comprehend her endgame. He thinks she’s the voice of his father, probing for an abject confession of his failure. So with bitter sarcasm, his old defense, he obliges. “I was a coward! I was weak! I wouldn’t kill a dragon!”

“You said *wouldn’t* that time” Astrid points out, stressing the element of *choice*. Not realizing she is making the same moral distinction he once made when he told his father, “I *won’t*” kill a
dragon, back when Stoick proposed he enter dragon training, Hiccup still reacts as if she were merely taunting him. “Three hundred years and I’m the first Viking who wouldn’t kill a dragon,” he confesses angrily, damning himself as he believes Astrid is doing. He turns away from her, withdrawing into himself. Bettelheim warned of this. Left to his own devices at this critical moment, he would almost certainly fail to become the hero Rapunzel and Eugene became at the end of Tangled. So many bad things could happen to him right now as he struggles with the effects of self-loathing.

Astrid quietly reminds her dejected friend, “First to ride one, though.” Hiccup looks up. His eyes widen in surprise at her implied praise. With a new understanding between them, she repeats her previous question about why he wouldn’t kill Toothless when he first had the chance. Turning back to face rather than withdraw from Astrid, and with no more bitterness in his voice, he finally answers. “I wouldn’t kill him because he looked as frightened as I was. I looked at him, and I saw myself.” Fear becomes a motive for sympathy and compassion rather than hatred and violence. It’s a novel idea, if you’ve got the emotional guts to pull it off.

Astrid, who exhibited little subtlety early in the film, has learned much since her “amazing” flight on the back of a dragon. “I bet he’s really frightened now” she reminds Hiccup about Toothless. “What are you going to do about it?” slyly challenges him to throw off his depression and take positive action. She may be more subtle in her perceptions now, but she’s still a Viking, strong and stubborn, just in a new style and for a new cause. When Hiccup replies, “Probably something stupid,” she quietly encourages more focus. “Good, but you’ve already done that,” refers to his recent, noble failure in the arena. Hiccup shrugs, yields to Astrid’s relentless prodding and revises his answer. “Then something crazy,” he announces confidently, racing off
to execute his "crazy" new plan.

"That's more like it," Astrid comments to herself, smiling and following him into the next perilous adventure. Hiccup was perhaps less difficult for her to manipulate emotionally than she was for him back at the cove. But they both succeeded when they had to. In Joseph Campbell's delineation of the hero's journey, Astrid plays one of the essential "helpers" Hiccup meets along the way. Without her timely intervention, it's possible defeatism would have overwhelmed him, doomed Toothless to death, condemned Vikings and dragons to endless warfare and resulted in a permanent estrangement between him and his father. No one succeeds alone all the time.

Hiccup's crisis of faith in himself parallels Rapunzel's, in *Tangled*. Hiccup's crisis results from his failure to change the hearts and minds of Vikings and dragons in the arena. Rapunzel's results from the apparent betrayal of Eugene and her subsequent withdrawal from the world and return to the tower and total dependency on Mother Gothel. Yet she employs a handkerchief Eugene gave her, the one depicting the royal symbol from her home village, to overcome her doubts. Eugene is not physically present when she does so, but he's certainly there in spirit. Astrid plays a similar role in helping Hiccup overcome his despondency, though in a more direct fashion.

Nearing Hellheim's Gate, Viking ships enter fog-shrouded waters dotted with towering rock formations. We've been here before, on our journey with Hiccup, Astrid and Toothless. Stoick is near his goal and grimly focused on it. Gobber, on the other hand, is a little less committed. As a Viking traditionalist, he won't admit to being afraid, so he deflects his doubts onto other members of the crew when he inquires about Stoick's battle plan. It's refreshing to hear a veteran of the dragon wars, with two missing limbs to prove it, acknowledge normal human fear, even if
he does so indirectly. In this he resembles Hiccup, who’s less than ferocious “Vikingness”
allowed him to explore beyond traditional Viking limits. Gobber is not quite Hiccup’s Yoda. If
anything, it’s the other way around. “Find the nest and take it,” Stoick tersely explains his
strategy. Gobber describes that plan in less than respectful terms as “the old Viking fallback, nice
and simple.” That sounds very much like Hiccup’s sarcastic “Pain. Love it,” with which he
mocked the cheap bravado of his fellow recruits just prior to their first training session.

Ignoring Gobber’s doubts, Stoick notes Toothless’s increasing agitation and steers his ship
accordingly. The scene ends with a big close-up of the prow of Stoick’s vessel, tipped with
massive battleaxe blades—an image of uncompromising hostility. The next scene begins with a
shot of Hiccup standing in front of the similarly massive wood and iron door that keeps dragons
imprisoned inside the arena. The power of Viking will is matched by the power of dragons about
to be unleashed. Both are obstacles Hiccup must overcome if he is to rescue Toothless and
everyone else from the menace of the Red Death—in other words, from themselves.

Behind Hiccup stand his fellow trainees. They vie with each other to be the most enthusiastic
participant in Hiccup’s rebellious plan, roughly shoving each other aside to get his attention. Just
as they did in numerous training sessions, they allow themselves to get distracted from the
important task at hand. They bring to Hiccup’s new vision of peaceful coexistence with dragons
the same flaws they brought to Stoick’s more traditional world of perpetual war with dragons.
Neither world view offers a utopia.

Ruffnut describes Hiccup’s plan as “crazy.” “I like that,” she adds, flashing him a flirtatious
grin. Earlier in the movie, she wouldn’t have given Hiccup the time of day. Astrid pushes
Ruffnut aside and takes her place in front of Hiccup. She has romantic plans of her own. Rivalry
exists even among members of the same team. Relieved at being rescued from Ruffnut’s amorous attention, Hiccup smiles gratefully at Astrid.

Carefully weaving around the rocks obstructing their route to Dragon Island, Viking ships stealthily approach their destination. The mood of the scene, enhanced by John Powell’s music, is tense and ominous. The dragon-headed prow of a derelict Viking ship lost on a previous raid looms high above members of the new expedition. A ghostly reminder of the danger ahead, it reminds me of two images in *Apocalypse Now*: Captain Willard’s requisitioned river boat passing silently beneath the wreckage of an American helicopter and later a warplane snagged in treetops along the shore. It’s a sobering sight for the Viking warriors. But leave it to Gobber to de-mystify that chilling symbol. “Oh, huh, I was wondering where that went,” he remarks casually. Creaking boat timbers and the crunch of a ship’s boom against the derelict’s figurehead add to the eerie ambience of this ghostly encounter. And just as Captain Willard encounters his darker, shadow self at the end of his journey up river, Stoick will meet *his* metaphorical double when he reaches the dragon nest. The monstrous beast tyrannizing the other dragons there embodies Stoick’s attitude carried to its most extreme.

The Viking armada reaches shore. Ignoring his reluctant and restless guide, Toothless, who has already served his purpose, Stoick peers at the mountainside ahead. The barely visible tail of a dragon quickly disappears from view on a high cliff. Stoick spots it and announces definitively, “We’re here.” The ominous hum of unseen dragons fills the air. As soon as Stoick jumps from his ship and lands on the ground, that sound ceases. Like jungle insects going silent at the approach of danger, the nesting dragons sense his hostile presence. Stoick looks every inch the experienced Viking general leading his troops into battle.
Back at the training arena, a very different Viking/dragon encounter occurs. Hiccup’s pacifying hand hovers inches above the snout of a Nightmare. The beast slowly advances on the retreating boy, but with more curiosity than aggression. The camera pans over the faces of Hiccup’s awestruck compatriots. We see a trace of affection in Astrid’s expression. Only Snotlout looks worried, in contrast to the fiercely grinning, traditional Viking face depicted on his belt buckle. Afraid of the approaching dragon, he reaches down to pick up a spear left over from the earlier arena battle. Astrid smacks him on the arm and warns him off. Snotlout drops his weapon. If he had threatened the dragon with it, the Nightmare would likely have attacked Hiccup, as it did when Stoick interfered during Hiccup’s attempt to pacify the beast. Just like Rapunzel and Eugene in *Tangled*, Hiccup occasionally relies on the help of former enemies. On this occasion, Astrid has his back.

Hiccup takes Snotlout’s reluctant hand and gently places it on the dragon’s snout. The Nightmare reacts favorably, which in turn draws the same reaction from Snotlout. Hiccup walks away. Still nervous, Snotlout would prefer he stay. Retrieving a rope from the nearby storage box of weapons, Hiccup tells Snotlout and the others they’ll need something to hold onto their dragons while riding them. His jittery trainees turn around and see a line of jittery dragons, ready though not yet eager to be partnered with Vikings. All of them are recognizable foes from earlier training sessions. Meanwhile, on Dragon Island, sharpened spikes rather than reins are being prepared by Vikings to greet the dragons who nest there.

Stoick draws his battle plan in the dirt: an ironic parallel to Hiccup’s drawing of Toothless, with which he lured the dragon into a closer friendship, and Toothless’s drawing of a maze, by which Hiccup earned the dragon’s trust. “All hell is gonna break loose,” Stoick warns. “And my
undies,” adds Gobber, again introducing a sensible, humorous dose of pragmatic caution into Stoick’s fearless plan. Once again ignoring that pesky voice of mild protest, the Chief soberly declares, “No matter how this ends, it ends today!” He is prepared to risk everything to attain final victory in the ageless war between Vikings and dragons. This is his Armageddon.

Closing his raised, open hand into a fist, the reverse of what Hiccup did when he made his first physical contact with Toothless, Stoick signals the attack to begin. Catapults hurl huge rocks at the side of the mountain, breaking open a huge hole. Stoick climbs up to that hole and peers into the darkness within. At his command, a flaming rock is launched into the mountain, illuminating the walls of the tunnel and revealing a vast number of nesting dragons. The place looks and sounds like a giant bat cave.

Like an extra-beefy Thor wielding his battle hammer, Stoick leads the Viking charge, consisting of both men and women, into enemy territory, triggering chaos within. The dragons flee without defending their home. Gobber is dumbfounded at the ease of victory. Loud cheers erupt among the invaders, with the exception of their Chief. Prudently skeptical that victory could come so quickly and bloodlessly, he remains on alert. A muffled roar rises in counterpoint to the Viking celebration. Toothless, frantically struggling to break free of his shackles, reacts to the ominous noise. The Chief doesn’t realize that his greatest potential ally against the unknown monster lurking within the mountain is the dragon he still considers his greatest enemy.

Stoick orders his prematurely celebrating troops to re-form their ranks and prepare for renewed battle, then turns to face whatever remains inside the cave. The mountain cracks and crumbles. A loud roar erupts from the darkness. Correctly anticipating the overwhelming nature of the threat about to emerge, perhaps because he recalls Hiccup’s warning, Stoick orders his warriors to
retreat, and does likewise. Just in time too, as the head and body of the Red Death, the gigantic
dragon who consumes everything, including other dragons, bursts out of the mountain. “Odin,
help us!” calls out Stoick, acknowledging this new threat might be too big for even a mountain­
leveling Viking to conquer.

The Red Death’s emergence from the mountain is another birth-like image, analogous to
Hiccup and Toothless flying out of the cove. But like the Stabbington Brothers emerging from a
hole in a tree at the end of the Snuggly Duckling tunnel, itmocks the idea of re-birth. The
Brothers experience no change of hearts and minds in their tunnel, and neither does the Red
Death, whose infantile rage is pathological and overwhelming. He is Stoick’s intransigent fear
and hostility pushed to monstrous extremes. He is King Kong embodying the collective rage and
frustration of people enduring the Great Depression. He is the birds whose massed attacks echo
the fears, resentments and frustrations of otherwise normal, though certainly imperfect, people in
*The Birds* (1963). He is a fantasized version of any obsession that gets out of hand.

Unlike the purely instinctive Red Death, Stoick has noble as well as impulsively dangerous
qualities. Living up to his name by resuming the battle no matter how desperate the odds against
him, he orders the Viking catapults back into action. Unfortunately, they’re little more than
annoying, harmless tinker toys to the enemy he faces now. One of Stoick’s frightened lieutenants
orders the warriors back to their ships. The Chief countermands that order, again keeping cool in
a crisis and astutely anticipating what’s to come. Sure enough, the Red Death opens its
cavernous maw and incinerates the entire Viking fleet with a single sweep of flame. Some
warriors take refuge by jumping into the sea. Toothless struggles to free himself from one of the
burning vessels.
"I was a fool," Stoick admits to himself for not believing Hiccup when the boy told him of the overwhelming danger that awaited him on Dragon Island. The hellish creature he now faces is a reflection of his own worst inclinations: rage and violence unchecked by reason and compassion. Just as Hiccup encountered his own dragon double in the cove, and made peace with it, Stoick the Vast confronts the vastly exaggerated, metaphorical incarnation of his own uncompromising hatred. It will require his son and his son's dragon double to eventually conquer that abomination.

Despite the shock of recognizing his monumental folly, Stoick is able to formulate contingency plans on the spur of the moment, ordering his warriors to retreat to the far side of the island. Whatever flaws he possesses, Stoick is a great field commander. Concerned for the safety of his aged friend, he orders Gobber to go with the others. But Gobber, despite his earlier misgivings about Stoick's latest crusade, demonstrates his undaunted courage in the present, desperate situation. "I think I'll stay, just in case you're thinking of doing something crazy" is his joking way of remaining loyal to an old friend in the face of death. Curiously, his complimentary use of the word "crazy" echoes Astrid's approval of Hiccup's "crazy" plan to rescue Toothless from Stoick and everyone from the Red Death. Gobber and Astrid are examples of essential "helpers" to the heroic likes of Stoick and Hiccup. And despite his many flaws, Stoick is a heroic figure, if not to the degree or in the revolutionary manner of Hiccup, who is the principle character in this story.

Stoick's emergency Plan B is to buy time for his people to escape the monster's wrath by sacrificing himself as a diversion. That heroic gesture recalls those of Rapunzel and Eugene during the climactic tower scene in *Tangled*, and is something of which Mother Gothel is
incapable. Grasping the Chief’s hand in a show of solidarity, Gobber vows, “Then I can *double* that time!” They smile at each other and go into action: two old veterans who fully realize the impossible odds they face.

The Godzilla-sized monster from the pit of a volcano is this fairy tale’s version of unredeemable evil. He’s a monster with no reason whatsoever, just an infantile, all-consuming urge to feed and kill. And when it doesn’t get what it wants, when it wants it, the Red Death throws a temper tantrum. Stoick and Gobber, two puny humans, confuse the beast by dividing its attention, each willing to sacrifice himself for the other and for the rest of their tribe.

After overcoming their own flaws, Hansel and Gretel cooperate to defeat the witch who tries to eat them. Just when two flawed yet courageous Vikings are about to be exterminated and consumed, Hiccup and his novice brigade of teen dragon riders arrive on the scene to rescue them. While their awed elders observe them, Hiccup gives battle instructions to *his* troops. The son is like the father, in some respects. Always good for a perceptive quip, Gobber points up towards Hiccup and tells Stoick, “Every bit the bullheaded, stubborn Viking you ever were.” A humbled Stoick nods in agreement.

The arrival of Hiccup and friends is like Eugene racing through the woods on Max to rescue Rapunzel from Mother Gothel’s tower: heroic and exhilarating, but prematurely optimistic. In classic fairy tale style, it doesn’t really matter that Hiccup’s friends and their dragons have had precious little time to get acquainted and become as skillful at team flying as did Hiccup and Toothless. They’re needed *now*, so they’re ready for the challenge.

For once, Fishleg’s vast knowledge of dragon lore proves useful rather than harmful. Hiccup devises a plan of attack based on the information Fishlegs provides. Tuffnut and Ruffnut almost
spoil that plan with their usual sibling rivalry, but eventually fall into line with the group effort, irritating the hell out of their mutual enemy instead of each other. Tuffnut refers to the monster as “Bride of Grendel,” splicing another fairy tale onto his own. What follows is a rousing, rollicking action sequence in which all of the younger characters act in harmony with each other—well, mostly. In true fairy tale wish-fulfilling fashion, the teenagers get to show their parents a thing or two about battling evil. On some abstract level, the giant dragon they confront and eventually overcome represents their parents. The torch of leadership is being passed from one generation to the next. And while his allies distract the Red Death, Hiccup is dropped onto Stoick’s burning flagship to rescue Toothless.

The teenagers’ effort isn’t quite flawless, of course. Just as the Twins briefly fall back into their old habit of feuding with each other, Snotlout is distracted from his assignment by an unexpected compliment from Astrid: “Yeah! You’re the Viking!” Flattered, he loses his balance on top of the monster’s head and almost falls off. And he does lose the hammer with which he was bashing the dragon’s many eyes. Though exhibiting far more skill than they did in the training arena, the teenagers are still trainees.

The Red Death’s tail slams down on Stoick’s ship, sinking Toothless to the bottom of the sea along with the platform to which he is still chained. Hiccup bravely swims down to save him, but lacks the physical strength to do so (the filmmakers do not compromise on that point) and loses consciousness. The hand of his father—the same hand that in the film’s first scene humiliated the boy by forcibly pulling him out of danger—reaches in and pulls Hiccup out of the water, saving him from drowning. Then Stoick jumps back into the water and, using his great strength, rescues Toothless as well. Stubbornly conventional in outlook though he may be, the Chief of Berk is
nevertheless capable of seeing the error of his ways, breaking free of his metaphorical connection to the unchanging Red Death. Toothless returns the favor, hauling Stoick back to the surface, summoning Hiccup to his saddle and flying into battle against the intractable monster.

Before rejoining the attack, Hiccup accepts his father’s heartfelt apology and returns one of his own. They shake hands. All previous conflicts between them seem resolved, except that Stoick is still worried about his son’s safety and reluctant to let him become an adult warrior. “You don’t have to go up there,” he insists. Hiccup uses Stoick’s own words to win their brief debate. “We’re Vikings. It’s an occupational hazard.” Releasing their handshake and in effect acknowledging his son’s independence, Stoick tells Hiccup, “I’m proud to call you my son,” restoring the kinship he angrily revoked at Meade Hall. Hiccup sincerely thanks his father, then launches himself and Toothless into battle.

Snotlout is rescued, barely, by the still bickering Twins and their Zippleback. Astrid and her Nadder, however, are almost sucked into the monster’s huge mouth until Toothless, streaking across the sky like a guided missile, intervenes. Astrid falls off her dragon in the mayhem, only to be rescued by Toothless. Once bitter enemies exchange smiles—the same smile Toothless learned from Hiccup back at the cove long ago.

Depositing Astrid safely on the ground, Hiccup and Toothless return to the battle. Backed by rousing music, there seems no way they won’t score a quick victory, to be followed by a jubilant celebration. Repeating the self-sacrificing diversionary tactics displayed by Stoick and Gobber earlier, Hiccup lures the suddenly airborne Red Death away from both Vikings and dragons. Smashing through rather than maneuvering around the rock towers between it and its quarry, the Monster closes on our heroes.
Hiccup draws his pursuer high into the clouds, deftly avoiding a massive burst of flame by anticipating it, the way Stoick anticipated the beast’s sudden emergence from the mountain and the incineration of the entire Viking fleet. This movie is *Hiccup’s* fairy tale, indulging sis contrary desires to both defy *and* equal, if not surpass, his father.

Hidden among the clouds, Toothless maneuvers invisibly to snipe at the Red Death, zapping its giant but vulnerable wings with repeated plasma blasts. The beast replies with a prolonged, scattershot blast of its own, setting Toothless’s artificial tail wing on fire. From the perspective of characters remaining on the ground, the battle in the clouds looks like an ominous preview of modern warfare between gigantic forces of destruction. It seems unlikely our scrawny hero and his comparatively small dragon can survive a contest with such an enormous foe.

Hiccup and Toothless risk retaliation by making a direct attack on their impulsive enemy, exposing themselves to danger and taunting the Red Death to follow them in a steep plunge earthward. At the last possible moment, on Hiccup’s command, Toothless turns and sends a plasma blast directly into the monster’s open mouth, igniting the Red Death’s flammable fuel just before it intended to incinerate them. Set on fire, the beast is distracted just long enough to prevent its disintegrating wings from stopping its rapid descent. Toothless employs the last of his own maneuverability to reverse direction and bolt skyward just as the Red Death slams into the ground and explodes in its own flame—a fitting end for a monster with unchecked appetites.

Mother Gothel’s final plunge to her death felt equally apocalyptic. Bruno Bettelheim wrote, “If our fear of being devoured takes the tangible form of a witch, it can be gotten rid of by burning her in the oven” (Bettelheim, 120). Witch or dragon, the end result is the same. The monster is conquered by the heroes.
Hiccup's defeat of the giant, implacably hostile Red Death, with the help of his own double, Toothless, is a metaphorical triumph over his giant, once implacably hostile father. But because it's a triumph once removed, it's less disturbing for both the boy and for us. In Tangled, Rapunzel's victory over the irredeemably evil Mother Gothel echoes a struggle she might have had with her real parents, the King and Queen, had she grown up with and tried to assert her independence from them. How to Train Your Dragon and Tangled are fairy tales that allow the emotionally intolerable to be acted out and confronted. Hiccup doesn't have to literally kill Stoick in order to earn respect and assert his right to independent thought and action. Their battles are waged through surrogates, just as Hiccup making peace with Toothless signals a mature victory over chaotic urges within himself. By destroying the Red Death, Hiccup triumphs over his father's and Berk's uncompromising fear and hatred of all dragons. What could be more fulfilling than convincing your former enemies to come round to your point of view? Rapunzel does so with the Snuggly Duckling thugs and ruffians, Maximus and Eugene. Hiccup does the same with Astrid, Stoick, Gobber and the entire village of Berk.

But the hero's journey's is a perilous one. There is no guarantee of success. Struck by the gigantic tail of the dying monster, Hiccup is knocked out of his saddle and falls into the inferno just as the last of Toothless's artificial tail wing burns up. The nearly flightless dragon plunges earthward in desperate pursuit of his vulnerable friend, both disappearing into a sea of flame. In the next scene that flame becomes drifting smoke and ash as Stoick searches the wreckage of battle, the battle he insisted on waging, for his son. He spots the Toothless lying on the ground, motionless. The aftermath of war, any war, is ugly and tragic for many.

This scene parallels Eugene's apparent death and surprising revival near the end of Tangled.
Both movies push us to the edge of tragedy before magically granting a reprieve. How to Train Your Dragon 2 pushes us even further, allowing tragedy to occur without reversing it.

Stoick frantically runs and stumbles to the dragon’s side, all thoughts of disowning his son long since cast aside. Toothless is alive, but Hiccup’s saddle is empty. The mechanical wing Hiccup designed and strapped to the dragon’s tail is burned away. Dropping to his knees, Stoick laments quietly to himself. “I did this” is an echo of Hiccup speaking the same three words when he came to regret injuring Toothless and then set the dragon free. Viewed from a distance, Stoick’s hulking body looks small and vulnerable, as Hiccup’s often did in moments of dejection or when he faced enormous obstacles. So too does a gathering of sympathetic Vikings and dragons pictured against a hazy silhouette of towering rock formations in the distance. Those menacing shapes look vaguely like dragons that once evoked monstrous fear and violence in Vikings, which naturally triggered the same in dragons. Now they evoke the monstrous guilt and remorse Stoick feels about having sacrificed the life of his son through his own stubbornness.

Astrid pushes through the crowd to see what she dreads—a grieving father and no sign of Hiccup. The horned heads of friendly dragons, Hiccup’s legacy of peace, appear over the horn-helmeted heads of Vikings. They’re not so different after all. Interestingly, Astrid’s is the only head without horns.

Toothless opens his weary eyes and stares at Stoick, who abjectly apologizes to the dragon, “I’m so sorry.” Reacting favorably to those words, as he once did to Astrid’s apology by slowing down the wild ride to which he subjected her, Toothless unfolds his protective black wings and reveals Hiccup shielded in his arms. Stoick rushes to the unconscious boy and discovers a heartbeat. Rejoicing among the crowd of spectators includes, to the slight consternation one
adult Viking, the Nightmare Hiccup befriended in the arena. Détente will take some getting used to.

Stoick lays a gentle hand on Toothless’s head and thanks the dragon for saving his son. Gobber approaches the trio, looks down and comments, “Well, you know, most of him.” Gallows humor, like much of what Gobber says, is one way of facing unpleasant truths. Hiccup did the same on many occasions, and would be the first to appreciate such humor now. Stoick is slightly annoyed by Gobber’s remark, glancing at his old friend as if to say, “Is that really appropriate at a time like this?” Yes, it is.

Bruised and singed, Hiccup lies asleep in bed at home in Berk, recuperating. Anxious, Toothless sniffs the boy, searching for signs of recovery. He woofs impatiently, like a dog. His pupils are full and wide—all compassion and affection. Hiccup opens his eyes. Toothless repeatedly nudges him, then places a well-intentioned but heavy dragon paw on the boy’s tender midsection. Hiccup cries out in pain and sits up. They still have much to learn about each other.

Hiccup quickly realizes he’s back in his own house. Even more surprising, Toothless is in his house. By invitation or invasion? The dragon, watching his friend from the foot of the bed, twitches with excitement. He gallops around clumsily, pauses for a moment to nuzzle the boy one more time, then perches, bird-like, on a large wooden beam overhead. Hiccup, reacting from old habit, is more concerned about the damage Toothless might do to his father’s house than surprised by the fact that they are both are still alive. In Cressida Cowell’s original stories, a very naughty Toothless frequently wreaks havoc in Stoick’s domain.

Getting out of bed, Hiccup realizes something is wrong. He lifts the blanket covering the lower half of his body, which remains off-screen and hidden from our view. Toothless leaves his perch
and crouches anxiously beside the boy’s bed. He knows what’s happened to Hiccup is a very big deal, because he’s experienced the same himself. Hiccup looks up, stunned by whatever he sees. In close up we see one shoed foot touch the floor beside the bed, soon joined by an artificial wooden leg tipped by a hunk of metal. Like Gobber before him, Hiccup has sacrificed a part of himself for the Viking cause. Not the traditional Viking cause, but one that Hiccup revised and improved for the benefit of both Vikings and dragons. He’s achieved the visible badge of honor his fellow teen trainees so glibly joked of achieving when they entered the training arena for their first lesson. But when it’s real, it’s not so amusing. The shock of losing a limb is visible on Hiccup’s face. His sacrifice is equivalent to Rapunzel losing her magical hair in Tangled.

Toothless sniffs at the artificial appendage, then looks up at Hiccup, making sympathetic sounds. The boy is obviously dismayed by his loss, but quickly recovers. Drawing strength from his best friend, he takes a deep breath, grabs the bedpost with determination and hauls himself to his feet. Standing lopsided, leaning against his friendly crutch, he is a memorable image of both fragility and courage. A carved dragon head snarls at him from another bedpost: the remnant of a Viking past now banished by Hiccup and the real dragon by his side.

Hiccup takes a half-step forward, leaving the security of his dragon crutch behind. It’s painful and awkward. Taking another deep breath, stealing himself for the next step in his recovery, with Viking grit written all over his face, he strides forward confidently on his artificial leg and promptly collapses to the floor. Or would have if Toothless hadn’t intruded his big head to break the boy’s fall and lift him up back up to a standing position. Thanking his buddy, Hiccup limps forward, again employing his best friend as a crutch. Viewed from behind as they head for the door leading outside (indicative of Hiccup’s determination to venture forth, no matter what), this
unlikely pair becomes a portrait of unwavering resolve and mutual support. Toothless's missing tail wing complements Hiccup's artificial leg. The boy who spared the dragon's life and fitted him with an artificial limb is now the beneficiary of a similar favor.

Walking unaided now, Hiccup opens the door and is shocked to see the head of a snarling Nightmare outside. This repeats a shot from the movie's first scene, when the same species of dragon shot a blast of fire in Hiccup's direction. As he did in that earlier scene, Hiccup defensively slams the door shut. "Toothless, stay here!" he warns, wishing to spare his friend the danger lurking outside. He fears the Viking/dragon war has resumed. But when he opens the door again he sees his fellow trainees happily riding the dragons with which they helped him defeat the Red Death.

Stepping outside his father's house, Hiccup is amazed by what else he sees. The village throngs with Vikings and dragons, all getting along peaceably. "I knew it. I'm dead," he jokes, not quite believing his eyes. Laughing and patting the boy on his shoulders, Stoick clarifies, "No, but you gave it your best shot." Dark humor? Stoick is learning from both Hiccup and Gobber. Gesturing towards the village below, Stoick asks his son, "What do you think?" Something he never asked Hiccup earlier in the movie, when he had no interest in or respect for the boy's opinions. It's a new world for Hiccup, and like most fairy tales it has the exhilarating feel of a dream come true, like watching the celebration of villagers and former outlaws in Rapunzel's home village at the end of Tangled. Both communities are much better places for their hero and heroines' return, and the revolutionary wisdom and change they brought with them.

Spotting their recovering hero, many of Berk's citizens approach and surround Hiccup. Visible over the door of Hiccup's home and nearby houses are carved remnants of the past: evil dragons
and the fierce Vikings who fought them. “Turned out all we needed was a little more of … this,” Stoick declares, gesturing towards Hiccup. “You just gestured to all of me,” Hiccup responds in astonishment, repeating a refrain he’s uttered twice previously, but this time under much happier circumstances. Hiccup is a civilizing force in the history of Berk, overturning rather than epitomizing its fierce traditions and uncompromising outlook. He couldn’t change himself to be more like his fellow Vikings, so he changed them and their dragon foes to be more like himself. And now the results are visible all around him.

Gobber injects his usual humor to temper the sentiment of this occasion. “Well, most of you.” Pointing to the boy’s artificial foot, he adds, “That bit’s my handiwork, with a little Hiccup flair thrown in.” The mentor has learned from the apprentice, in more ways than one. “You think it’ll do?” inquires the blacksmith. Lifting his manufactured limb off the ground and scrutinizing it, Hiccup replies with equal humor. “I might make a few tweaks” draws approving laughter from his admirers. Like Eugene’s touch of humor at the end of Tangled, Hiccup and Gobber make the fairy tale happy ending to How to Train Your Dragon more palatable and enjoyable.

And so too does Astrid, who approaches Hiccup from behind, slugs him in the arm and scolds, “That’s for scaring me.” Complaining the way he used to when something went wrong, Hiccup whines, “Is it always going to be this way?” Until he’s stopped in mid-gripe when Astrid grabs him by the vest, pulls him towards her and plants a big kiss on his lips, which is even better than the kiss on the cheek she gave him at the cove. “I could get used to it,” jokes Hiccup. They grin at each other. Everything is working out right for Hiccup, which could happen only in a fairy tale.

Proving his solidarity with Hiccup’s Viking/dragon détente, Gobber gifts the boy with a new,
improved, flashy red tail wing for Toothless. Speaking of whom, the impulsive dragon is no longer able to restrain himself. Disobeying Hiccup’s order to remain in the house, he roughly leapfrogs over several hapless Vikings in order to reach his best friend. The bond of affection between them is too strong to be thwarted by Hiccup’s misguided attempt to protect Toothless from what he thought was a resumption of warfare between dragons and Vikings.

In the final scene, Hiccup’s metal foot slips securely into a newly-designed metal stirrup—no doubt one of the “tweaks” he promised. Toothless’s new tail wing flexes, sporting the merged image of a Viking helmet and dragon teeth. Bagpipes gear up on the soundtrack, signaling a new Viking tradition. Hiccup and Toothless stand ready for take-off alongside Astrid and her new friend, a blue and yellow Nadder whom she will eventually name Stormfly, which makes her the film’s equivalent of Camikaze in Cressida Cowell’s original novels. Sharing Hiccup’s point of view, we look out over the village as his narrator persona repeats his opening prolog, but with a few new tweaks.

“This is Berk. It snows nine months of the year and hails the other three. Any food that grows here is tough and tasteless. The people that grow here are even more so.” As we accompany Hiccup and his new friends on a thrilling flight over the village, the narrator adds new material to the old. “The only upside are the pets [no longer “pests”]. While other places have ponies or parrots, we have … dragons!” Hiccup and Toothless spin skyward towards the sun, and seemingly boundless possibilities, as the movie ends. But the dance continues in the credits and music, with lyrics added.

Like “I See the Light” in *Tangled*, “Sticks and Stones” at the end of *How to Train Your Dragon* repeatedly emphasizes the importance of seeing things one didn’t before. “Never
even knowing just how blind I’ve been,” “Suddenly I see” and “It’s like the fog has lifted” from the Alan Menken/Glenn Slater song are matched by “Eyes open wide” and “open your eyes and see” from the song by Jonsi. Both films are about great changes in perception. They are fairy tales in which the human mind is the real playground for a tug of war between the forces of light and darkness. The fantasized characters, settings and actions recreate that interior battle in colorful, memorable and emotionally exhilarating terms.

Some of the lyrics in “Sticks and Stones” are sung in Icelandic, giving the song a multi-cultural flavor reflecting the merger of different, Viking and dragon societies. I’m reminded of a scene in The Curse of the Cat People, a non-horror horror film from 1944, in which an American family sings a traditional Christmas carol in their home while outside, in the snow-covered yard, a fantasy character harmonizes with them in French. The beautiful counterpoint intrigues the family’s young child, who embarks on a fairy tale adventure in the company of her fantasy guide. Like Hiccup, the little girl sometimes sees more than what her stubbornly conventional father can. But after her perilous and exciting adventure, she too reconciles with her imperfect if well-intentioned parent, just like Hiccup does with Stoick.

The cast credits feature drawings of dragons appearing with the names of major Viking characters: Toothless with Hiccup, a Nadder with Astrid, a Nightmare with Snotlout, a Gronckle with Fishlegs and a Zippleback with Tuffnut and Ruffnut. All are appropriately matched, since those are the dragons the Vikings eventually befriend. But with Stoick, who never rides a dragon in this film, the accompanying drawing is of the Red Death, lending credence to the notion that Stoick’s uncompromising fear and hatred of dragons, until Hiccup finally changes his mind, is metaphorically embodied by that raging, all-consuming monster.
Like Tangled, How to Train Your Dragon concludes on a happy note, with all conflicts resolved. Rapunzel, Eugene, Maximus, the thugs and ruffians, Hiccup, Astrid, Stoick, the dragons and the citizens of Berk have all matured into better people, or human-like animals. How to Train Your Dragon 2 postulates, “What happens after the happy ending?” Unless the characters wing their way to Valhalla at story’s end, life goes on. Complications arise. Sustaining a happy ending requires effort and is often plagued by setbacks. We leave Hiccup a brilliantly successful teenager with a bright future. But he still has some growing up to do. Stoick is still the Chief of Hiccup’s village. Rapunzel, by contrast, earned her royal crown at the end of Tangled. Her parents discretely faded out of the picture and Eugene informed us of her enlightened reign over the kingdom. Hiccup, who is several years younger than Rapunzel, has more battles to fight, including some with his parents, and more mistakes to make, before he earns his symbolic crown and takes full control over his kingdom.
How To Train Your Dragon 2:
The Reptile Strikes Back

But first, a few words about the television show Dragons, which serves as an important transition between the conclusion of How to Train Your Dragon and the beginning of How to Train Your Dragon 2. The TV episodes elaborate on characters and events from the first movie. They also subject the fairy tale, happily-ever-after ending of the first movie to some reality checks, which is appropriate since Hiccup did not attain full independence at the end of How to Train Your Dragon. He is not yet the Chief of his village. And finally, the TV episodes point the way to challenges that will confront Hiccup in the second movie.

Not surprisingly, the series contains no major developments in the lives of the main characters comparable to what occurs in the movies. No one loses a leg or dies, and the budding romance between Hiccup and Astrid basically treads water until Dragon 2. What the TV episodes do very well, regardless of being or maybe because they are denied the dramatic highs and lows of the feature films, is flesh out details of the characters' lives and personalities, and allow the supporting cast to shine a little brighter than before. The challenges of everyday life in Berk come to the forefront, including the more mundane difficulties of adjusting to co-existence with new friends who were recently enemies and in many ways remain strangers. Who would have
anticipated, following the big celebration at the end of *How to Train Your Dragon*, that a daily deluge of dragon poop and a grumpy, dragon-hating old recluse named Mildew could stir up so much trouble in paradise? Happy endings only last forever if the story ends at the right place. But what happens the next day, week or year? Author Cressida Cowell noted that “with many happy endings, there is a sting in the tail” (*How to Speak Dragonese*, 224).

Snotlout concludes the first movie as a member in good standing of Hiccup’s dragon-riding team. But in *Dragons* his personality regresses back to what it was at the start of the first movie. He is arrogant, reckless, selfish, petty, envious and frequently cruel. As a member of Berk’s new Dragon Academy, initiated by Stoick with Hiccup at the helm, Snotlout tries to undermine Hiccup’s leadership so he can usurp that role, for which he is unqualified, for himself. Their rivalry reaches a climax in “Defiant One,” in which Snotlout is too proud and jealous to team up with Hiccup when they find themselves stranded together on an island and pursued by hostile forces. Eventually they overcome their mutual enmity and rescue each other from danger. In “A Tale of Two Dragons” Snotlout’s rivalry is with Astrid. By the end of the episode they must put aside their bitter feud in order to stop their dragons from killing each other.

Two episodes in particular highlight Snotlout’s penchant for cruelty. In “Gem of a Different Color” he relentlessly bullies Fishlegs until the latter turns on his tormentor and does a little intimidating of his own. In “Thawfest” Snotlout taunts Hiccup after beating him in a series of athletic contests. Even when Hiccup deliberately lets his opponent win the final race, after learning how much pressure Snotlout’s father put on his son to uphold the family honor, Snotlout still cannot be gracious about it. But at least we get a glimpse into why Snotlout is such a fierce competitor. He’s terrified of disappointing his stern, demanding father.
But if Snotlout’s personality regresses from the promise it showed at the conclusion of the first movie, *Dragons* also allows him to embark on a miniature heroic journey that echoes Hiccup’s much bigger journey in *How to Train Your Dragon*. During Academy training exercises in preparation for an expected attack on Berk, in “Race to Fireworm Island,” Snotlout drives his dragon, Hook Fang, beyond the point of exhaustion to near-death. His pitiless father advises him to discard the sick dragon in favor of a stronger one: Berk’s version of survival of the fittest. Instead, Snotlout defies his father and risks everything, including his life, to find a cure for Hook Fang. By the end of the episode he realizes his father knows nothing about dragons.

Timid, sensitive, scholarly and tender-hearted, Fishlegs is the anti-Snotlout. He wears his heart on his sleeve. Although he fears many things, especially the prospect of failing, Fishleg’s strong sense of right and wrong helps him overcome that fear, and the paralysis that often accompanies it. In “Live and Let Fly” he refuses to rat out his friends when the Chief questions him about their violation of an official ban on dragon flying. In “Gem of a Different Color” he runs away rather than face Snotlout in a hand-to-hand combat exercise at the Academy. But then he returns and scares the crap out of his tormentor in order to defend a mother dragon and help her retrieve the eggs Snotlout stole from her.

Fishlegs’ vast knowledge of dragons was more often a handicap than an asset in *How to Train Your Dragon*. In the television series his scholarly expertise often benefits his friends. He identifies the cause of a dragon plague in “Dragon Flower,” helps find a cure for Hook Fang in “Fireworm Island,” discovers the reason for and a solution to the annual attack on Berk by the Frightmare dragon in “Fright of Passage,” and rescues Toothless and Hiccup from peril in “The Eel Effect.” At the conclusion of the latter episode, Fishlegs and Hiccup enter their newly
acquired knowledge in the Book of Dragons, carried over from the first movie but in the TV series more of a scientific rather than a mythical account of dragons.

Fishlegs’ growth as a character in the series is best summed up by Hiccup. “Having courage isn’t the same thing as having no fear. It’s being afraid and pushing forward anyway.” The best thing Hiccup or anyone else ever says to Fishlegs is, simply, “We need you,” which is music to the ears of the underappreciated young Viking.

Tuffnut and Ruffnut, the rowdy and eccentric twins, continue to do on TV what they did so memorably in *How to Train Your Dragon*, insulting and arguing with each other at every opportunity. Their fondness for destruction, even when inflicted on themselves, borders on the disturbing. In “Fright of Passage” bickering between the twins distracts them from recognizing an urgent request for help from Hiccup. In “Twinsanity” their sibling rivalry almost triggers a war between Berk and a neighboring tribe. Without the guiding hand of a more mature Hiccup, the twins, like Snotlout, could easily become villains.

Of course, the exploits of Tuffnut and Ruffnut are always good for a laugh. Assigned to supervise the dragons while the other Academy members go off on a training exercise in “The Night and the Fury,” Tuffnut botches the job badly. He tries to distract the dragons by telling them ghost stories around a campfire. He thinks he’s really good at it. They don’t. On the other hand, the twins’ sheer wackiness occasionally serves as an antidote to Snotlout’s arrogance. In “Frozen,” “The Flight Stuff” and “Fright of Passage” they force Snotlout to play the fool in their comic productions, often with hilarious results.

But even the resident clowns of *How to Train Your Dragon* get an occasional chance to shine with a kind of insane brilliance in *Dragons*. In “Zippleback Down” Tuffnut befriends and
half-trains a wild Typhoomerang, mesmerizing the beast with his bizarre conversational patter. He does the same to a group of hostile soldiers in “A View to a Skrill.” In “Free Scauldy,” Ruffnut distracts a wounded, frightened and distrustful Scauldren by singing a bizarre medley of songs to it while her friends attempt to free its injured wing from a fallen boulder. When an attack by other wild dragons threatens to cut short their rescue attempt, Ruffnut refuses to abandon her new friend, cutting off her own braided hair in order to manufacture a brace for its broken wing.

“The Eel Effect” is the culmination of the twins’ peculiar odyssey through the TV series. As a side-effect of being infected with eel pox fever, Tuffnut and Ruffnut become eccentrically brilliant, proposing scientific experiments otherwise undreamt of until Isaac Newton and inventing a recipe for flavored ice cream using yak milk. Their advanced theories and proposals make no sense to their creped-out companions, who insist on giving the twins a triple dose of eel pox fever antidote when it becomes available. But for a fleeting moment their innovative thinking outshines even that of Hiccup. The hopeful message conveyed by this enjoyable episode is that almost anyone, potentially, has something positive to offer the world.

Astrid, the super-competent warrior-in-training who joins Hiccup’s revolutionary détente with dragons in How to Train Your Dragon, retains elements of a more traditional Viking outlook in the television episodes. In “Portrait of Hiccup as a Buff Man” she is attracted to an idealized, painted depiction of Hiccup as a brawny rather than scrawny young man. And when Hiccup challenges Tuffnut’s assertion that “competition is the very essence of life itself” by insisting that cooperation is more important, in “Worst in Show,” Astrid sides with the twin. Even after an attack on the Academy tests the validity of both ideas, the debate rages on, unresolved.
Other episodes highlight the softer side of Astrid. In “Thawfest” Astrid scolds Hiccup for getting too caught up in his desire to defeat the annoying Snotlout in a series of athletic contests. She rewards him with a kiss when he deliberately loses the final competition after realizing how desperate Snotlout is to maintain his family’s unbeaten legacy. So in spite of what she said, competition isn’t more important than everything else for Astrid.

In two particular episodes Astrid overcomes powerful emotions that fuel her competitive warrior spirit beyond reason. “Heather Report, Parts I and II” finds her jealous of Hiccup’s naïve attentiveness to a pretty young woman who falsely claims to be a shipwreck survivor. In reality she’s an agent of Berk’s sworn enemy, Alvin the Treacherous, because he’s holding her parents hostage until she steals Hiccup’s Book of Dragons and brings it to him. Astrid recognizes Heather’s deception long before any of her fellow Academy members do. But when she learns the truth about Heather’s imprisoned parents, she casts aside her jealousy and suspicion to help Heather free them.

“Fright of Passage,” like “Thawfest,” is about a terrible burden of honor rooted in the past. When Astrid was a child, her Uncle Finn allegedly displayed cowardice under fire when he froze during a Viking battle with the legendary Frightmare dragon that attacks Berk once a year. Astrid is fiercely determined to kill the monster in order to salvage her family’s damaged reputation. But when she learns the truth about her uncle, who was in fact temporarily paralyzed by the dragon’s spit and therefore could not participate in Berk’s defense, and about the Frightmare, who only attacks the residents of Berk because it’s defending its food source, she joins Hiccup’s effort to find a peaceful solution and risks her life to save her fellow riders from the dragon’s wrath, thus proving her courage after all.
As Chief of Berk, Stoick faces one crisis after another in *How to Train Your Dragon*, until his reconciliation with Hiccup and acceptance of peace with dragons seems to solve most of his problems. The television series, however, confronts him with new challenges, some of them more mundane than apocalyptic. Viking Politics 101, so to speak. The difficulties of adapting to new neighbors and their strange ways places Stoick smack in the middle of disputes between dragon advocates, led by Hiccup, and dragon haters, epitomized by old Mildew. Because the Chief remains a traditionalist in many respects, he often sides with the dragon detractors, even when the dragons are falsely accused of wrongdoing. He does not actively search for ways to improve relations between the two species, or for the truth when there is foul play. That’s Hiccup’s responsibility. But in the end Stoick usually accepts the compromise Hiccup offers him, and occasionally comes up with one himself. “When Lightning Strikes,” “Bing! Bam! Boom!,” “Twinsanity” and “Cast Out, Part II” all follow this pattern.

The father/son power struggle that seemed happily resolved at the end of the first movie resurfaces in the television series. Though pleased to see his son mature, Stoick is reluctant to give up his authority over the boy, often treating him as an irresponsible child, refusing to consider the teenager’s advice or share important information with him. “I’m the best man for the job,” claims Hiccup in “How to Start a Dragon Academy.” “You’re not a man yet,” Stoick counters. This anticipates their conflict in *How to Train Your Dragon 2*, in which Stoick pressures Hiccup to accept the role of village Chief yet frequently ignores and overrules his son’s advice. In *Tangled* Rapunzel’s royal parents discretely stepped off screen at the end of the movie, allowing her to take complete charge of the kingdom—meaning herself.

But Stoick is not always a pain in the ass to Hiccup in the TV series. Occasionally he offers
good counsel to his son as Hiccup struggles to find his way as leader of the Dragon Academy, which is basically practice for running the entire village as Chief. When forced to deal with the Academy’s frequently unreasonable, bickering members, Hiccup seeks advice from his more experienced father, and gets it. Inclined to be too close emotionally to his friends in the Academy, Hiccup learns from Stoick that he must cultivate a degree of objectivity in order to solve disputes among them.

As in the first movie, Gobber retains a conventional way of looking at the world, yet is capable of some flexibility in that regard. In “When Lightning Strikes” he accepts the popular superstition that a series of destructive lightning strikes in the village is Thor’s divine punishment for allowing dragons to reside there. But when the frightened villagers make scapegoats of Toothless and Hiccup in an attempt to appease the Thunder god, Gobber rejects superstition and defends the boy and his dragon. A more humorous example of Gobber’s backwardness is his refusal to take a bath in “Tunnel Vision,” despite the suffering and protests of his friends. When finally forced to do so, he protests vigorously, wildly exaggerating his cleansing ordeal.

“Viking for Hire” postulates a down-to-earth situation never glimpsed in How to Train Your Dragon. The end of the dragon wars renders obsolete Gobber’s skill at making dragon-killing weapons. Who knew peace could produce unemployment? Poor Gobber finds it difficult to adapt to changing times. When he is called upon to put down Hook Fang, Snotlout’s dragon, who goes crazy and turns violent for some mysterious reason, Gobber’s old identity as a dragon fighter is reaffirmed. But instead of killing Hook Fang, he correctly diagnoses the dragon’s malady as a painfully infected tooth. Extracting that tooth, Gobber forges a new identity and purpose for
himself as a dragon veterinarian. Even the crusty old blacksmith can adapt to new social conditions.

Hiccup continues to play peacemaker, scientist and inventor in the television series—roles he carved out in the first film. Faced with the inevitable problems of two very different cultures merging into one, he figures out new ways for Vikings and dragons to benefit rather than annoy one another. And he does so without trying to deny or change the nature of either group. “We just have to work with and not against them,” he advises.

Through scientific study and technological innovation, Hiccup improves the lives of Berk’s multicultural residents. A pint-sized Sherlock Holmes, he deduces that incriminating dragon tracks linked to the theft of Viking boots are fake (“In Dragons We Trust”). With Gobber’s assistance, in “When Lightning Strikes,” Hiccup designs and builds sturdy metal dragon perches for the roofs of Viking houses, so those roofs no longer collapse under excessive weight—a practical problem no one foresaw at the end of the first movie, when dragons were shown happily perched atop Viking homes. But scientific progress is fitful, proceeding through trial and error. The metal perches attract lightning from passing thunderstorms, convincing superstitious villagers that Thor is punishing them for permitting dragons in their midst. Yet Hiccup persists, eventually proving that lightning is naturally drawn to metal and is not the product of divine wrath. “Most people are afraid of things because they don’t understand them” he declares in “Breakneck Bog.”

In “Zippleback Down” Hiccup invents the fire break, a method of impeding forest fires by doing a controlled burn of the potential fuel in their path. Other Hiccup innovations include tracing dragon migration patterns from island to island, inventing airmail by using Terrible
Terrors to deliver messages and devising an improved artificial tail wing that allows Toothless to fly solo. Occasionally, however, innovation proves a double-edged sword. In “Bing! Bam! Boom!” Hiccup creates a long-range listening device he dubs the Thunder Ear, hoping to provide Berk with early warning of an enemy’s approach. Instead he detects the distant cries of orphaned baby Thunderdrum dragons, which leads to rather than prevents trouble. Equally unanticipated, the Thunder Ear allows Stoick to spy on conversations among the villagers. He overhears Gobber make an unflattering remark about him and punishes the blacksmith for it. Though the incident is played for laughs, clearly the Thunder Ear has the potential to become a device for spying by Big Brother.

Like Hiccup’s scientific innovations, his compassion too sometimes causes rather than prevents problems. In “Viking for Hire” he finds it difficult to fire Gobber from his new job as saddle maker and dragon trainer at the Academy, even though the old man performs miserably at both tasks. In “Heather Report, Parts I and II” he is much too trusting of an attractive young woman who is secretly working for a sworn enemy of Berk. In “We are Family” villains Alvin the Treacherous and Dagger the Deranged trick Hiccup into bringing Toothless to the Isle of Night by concocting a phony story about the island being populated by Night Furies. Hiccup just wants his best friend to have a family of his own kind.

But most of the time Hiccup’s finer qualities are an asset. “We never shoot first and ask questions later” he cautions Tuffnut and Ruffnut when they want to launch a pre-emptive attack on Dagger the Deranged in “The Flight Stuff.” Hiccup cannot always maintain peace, but more than any other character he tries. And considering the number of dangerous new dragons introduced in the television series, he usually finds a way to befriend them or drive them away
without harming them. No more of the “kill on sight” Viking policy he read about in the Book of Dragons in the first film.

On rare occasions even Hiccup succumbs to his baser emotions, backsliding from the maturity he attained in How to Train Your Dragon. In “Portrait of Hiccup as a Buff Man” resentment of his father’s preference for a son with a traditional, powerful Viking physique sends Hiccup on a perilous treasure hunt that recklessly endangers the life of his best friend, Toothless. Eventually the hunt presents Hiccup with a choice between two “treasures”: a battle hammer or a writing quill. One leads to escape, the other to death. Hiccup chooses the less obviously belligerent quill and is rewarded with survival for himself and his dragon.

“Frozen” depicts Hiccup growing weary of the constant bickering among his Academy crew. So he volunteers to fly off with Toothless in search of a missing acquaintance named Trader Johann. It’s a preview of his more complexly motivated flight from responsibility at the start of How to Train Your Dragon 2. Sensitivity and disillusionment are two sides of the same coin. But at the end of “Frozen” the former wins out. Giving the stranded Trader Johann a ride to Berk on Toothless, an exasperated yet patient Hiccup listens to his passenger’s endless, boring stories about travelling the world alone. And for his kindness Hiccup is rewarded with a bottle of precious ink, with which he can continue to record scientific discoveries and draw pictures that chronicle his expanding world.

New and interesting characters appear in the TV series. Among them is Bucket, so named for the bucket he wears on his head as protection for an old, unspecified injury. In the bad old days he might have been cruelly dubbed the “village idiot.” But Dragons gives him a position of respect and usefulness in Viking society. He is, among other things, a talented artist (“Portrait of
Hiccup as a Buff Man”), a weather forecaster (“Animal House”) and a loyal friend of Hiccup and Toothless when other villagers prove less so (“When Lightning Strikes”).

The addition of an old recluse named Mildew to the cast of characters reminds us that progress is neither smooth nor necessarily permanent. The anti-Hiccup, Mildew spouts a philosophy of intolerance. “A dragon’s gonna do what a dragon’s gonna do. It’s their nature. And nature always wins.” To validate his prejudice, Mildew lies, cheats, plants false evidence and conspires with other villains to thwart Hiccup.

Alvin the Treacherous and Dagger the Deranged are two new villains introduced in Dragons. Though treacherous, as his name implies, Alvin is not inflexibly evil. Eventually he becomes an ally of Berk, as the pirate Eret will become in How to Train Your Dragon 2. By way of contrast, Dagger the Deranged foreshadows the arrival of Drago Bludvist in the second feature film. As Chief of the Berzerker tribe, Dagger is ruthless, paranoid, sadistic and tyrannical. Incapable of compromise or compassion, he is the kind of menace that, unlike the more flexible Alvin, seems to validate Stoick’s conservative distrust rather than Hiccup’s progressive outreach. Like Drago, Dagger conforms to the Red Death/Mother Gothel model of intransigent immaturity.

Little Gustav, a television character even younger than Hiccup was in How to Train Your Dragon, is a kind of Hiccup-in-training. Eager to join the Academy and ride dragons in “The Flight Stuff,” he is initially rejected by Hiccup as too young. This is analogous to Stoick initially rejecting Hiccup’s desire to enter dragon training in the first movie. And like Hiccup, Gustav defies authority to pursue his dream, venturing alone into the classic fairy tale forest to confront and hopefully befriend a wild dragon. He makes mistakes, as Hiccup did while getting acquainted with Toothless, but persists and eventually succeeds.
Like Hiccup when he tried and failed to tame a wild Nightmare in the arena, in the first feature film, Gustav experiences his own critical moment of self-doubt. Intruding himself into the Academy’s grown-up battle against the forces of evil, he is overwhelmed by the experience. But with the help of his guide, the surprising Snotlout, Gustav overcomes his doubt and triumphs. As a reward for Gustav’s courage, Hiccup grudgingly elevates him to the status of “apprentice rider,” though still forbids him to ride dragons until he is older. Predictably, and in the rebellious manner of Hiccup during the first movie, Gustav disobeys. He is to Hiccup what Hiccup was to Stoick: a child who must at some point rebel against an older authority figure.

*Dragons* on television allows us to get better acquainted with dragons who, except for Toothless, did not get much screen time in *How to Train Your Dragon*. Stout, slow, sentimental and loyal, but with a few surprising tricks up her sleeve, Meatlug is a reflection of her rider, Fishlegs. She provides the teenage Viking with the affection and understanding he needs. Hook Fang, like Snotlout, is quick-tempered and impulsive. He often rudely chastises Snotlout when the Viking gets too bossy or vain, supplying an occasional, much-needed hot-seat or simply flying away and letting the cranky teenager stew in his own egotism. Stormfly and Astrid, by contrast, are usually in-sync—a combination of beauty, strength and elegance. Every rider in the television series seems to get the dragon he or she needs.

But on occasion dragon behavior in the TV episodes foreshadows a troubling development in *How to Train Your Dragon 2*. Plagued by a painfully infected tooth in “Viking for Hire,” Hook Fang turns wild and dangerous. Eventually the cause of and solution to his problem are found, but it’s a close call. In “A Tale of Two Dragons” Hook Fang and Storm Fly are exposed to an addictive plant known as dragon root and lose self-control, becoming violent. Not even
Toothless is immune to the plant's effects. "Gift of the Night Fury" depicts Berk's dragons succumbing to their nesting instincts. When those instincts kick in, the pupils of their eyes narrow to reptilian slits, the way they did when dragons became hostile in the first movie. Blinded by instinct, they fly away from Berk, deserting their Viking families. Hiccup resolves the situation to the satisfaction of dragons and Vikings alike, but the episode points the way to a more dangerous development in Dragon 2.

In "The Eel Effect" Toothless is driven mad when he accidently consumes an eel that was attacking Hiccup. The dragon loses control of his plasma blasts and hallucinates that Hiccup is a hideous stranger to be feared and attacked. Like other aberrant dragon behavior depicted in the television series, this example is not permanent and results in no injuries or deaths. Yet it foreshadows the hypnotic control Drago Bludvist and his Alpha Male wield over all dragons in How to Train Your Dragon 2, where the consequences are lethal, and tragic.

In less grim, more fun ways, the television series looks back to the first movie and forward to the second. In "Gift of the Night Fury" Hiccup exits his house early one winter morning. His metal foot slips on a patch of ice and he almost falls to the ground. Toothless intrudes his big head to stop the boy from falling, as he did in How to Train Your Dragon when Hiccup tried to take his first full step on his new artificial leg. "In Dragons We Trust" shows Hiccup jumping off his dragon's back in mid-air and free-falling towards the sea, fully confident that Toothless will follow and retrieve him, which prefigures their advanced aerial maneuvers in How to Train Your Dragon 2.

Dragons does not merely meander pointlessly between two dynamic feature films. It actively explores variations on themes presented in the movies, providing us with a glimpse of reality
after the happy ending of *How to Train Your Dragon* and preparing us for new complications Hiccup will encounter in *How to Train Your Dragon 2*. In addition, it’s almost as entertaining as its big brothers.

At the end of *Tangled*, Rapunzel takes charge of the kingdom her parents once ruled. She marries the man of her new dream and, in her own words, they live happily ever after. Bruno Bettelheim has a plausible explanation for why such fairy tale kingdoms are often vaguely defined after they are attained. “There is no purpose to being the king or queen of this kingdom other than being a ruler rather than being ruled” (Bettelheim, 127). Rapunzel and Eugene have gained their independence from childish fears and needs.

By the conclusion of *How to Train Your Dragon*, Hiccup has transformed Berk into a near-paradise in which Vikings and dragons reside peacefully together, to the mutual benefit of both. But he is not yet Chief of Berk. That title still belongs to Stoick. Father and son enjoy a harmonious reconciliation in which Stoick acknowledges Hiccup’s superior wisdom with regard to dragons, but there is no transfer of authority. Is Stoick ready to yield? Is Hiccup ready to accept responsibility? Are all differences between them resolved? And what role will Astrid play in Hiccup’s future? The two teenagers, who are three years younger than was Rapunzel in *Tangled*, are not quite ready to live happily ever after as husband and wife. All of these unanswered questions fuel the next chapter of Hiccup’s heroic journey. Fortunately the makers of *How to Train Your Dragon 2* were not content to merely repeat the story elements of its very successful predecessor. In some ways the sequel challenges assumptions rooted in the original. The metaphorical beast that resides in all of us returns with a vengeance, threatening to destroy
everything Hiccup, Toothless, Vikings and dragons achieved at the end of *How to Train Your Dragon*.

*As Dragon 2* opens, we approach Berk from a similar camera angle and in the same manner as we did in the first film, with one key difference. Flying past us, heading in the opposite direction, are Hiccup and Toothless. Moving too fast to be clearly seen, they appear to be fleeing the village, which contradicts what we hear. “This is Berk,” announces narrator Hiccup, as he did at the beginning of the earlier movie. His village “packs more than a few surprises,” he insists, accurately describing the sequel as a whole, which overturns a number of audience expectations. Even at first glance we see significant changes in Berk, including sturdy dragon perches on the roofs of houses (thanks to Hiccup’s ingenuity in “When Lightning Strikes”) and a giant dragon bath mounted on pillars. The merger of dragon and Viking societies seems to be going very well, and Berk is more prosperous and lively because of it. Integration problems portrayed in some of the early television episodes seem harmoniously resolved at the beginning of the second movie.

Sheep huddle together and cower. The shadow of a dragon flits across the ground in front of them. Has the alliance between Vikings and dragons broken down? No. “Life here is amazing,” the narrator reassures us, repeating what he said at the end of *How to Train Your Dragon*. “Just not for the faint of heart,” he adds. One of the sheep has a target painted on its side, implying Viking acquiescence in whatever is happening to their livestock.

The sheep without painted targets push their unfortunate colleague out of their huddle, leaving him exposed. This is not exactly loyalty to a friend, which is a major theme in the sequel. But here that theme is introduced in lighthearted, humorous terms. The targeted sheep is snatched up by something too fast for us to identify, as was its predecessor at the start of the first movie.
Fortunately for this sheep, circumstances have changed. Lethal attacks by dragons on Viking livestock in the bad old days have given way to a harmless contest known as Dragon Racing. Instead of battling for their lives and property, an excited audience of Vikings cheers on their favorite dragons and riders, who weave in and around the village at great speed and with tremendous skill. Stoick observes the race from his pre-eminent platform on the public grandstand. He is still very much in charge of the village, and presumably of his son.

A confident Fishlegs rides his pal, Meatlug, with surprising ease—a distinct improvement over their flights in the first film. They’ve captured the targeted sheep. Attacking from below, Snotlout and Hook Fang steal the prize and taunt their frustrated rival about it. We’ve seen this kind of behavior before, in the first film and in the TV series. What we haven’t seen before is what happens next. Snotlout tosses his pilfered sheep into the arms of Ruffnut, passing by with her brother, Tuffnut, on their two-headed Zippleback, Barf and Belch. Even more surprisingly, Snotlout also tosses Ruffnut a compliment about her appearance. Back in their arena training days he only had eyes for Astrid. Unfortunately for Snotlout, Ruffnut is no more receptive to his amorous attention than was Astrid.

Tuffnut is not impressed either. Sporting yellow and black face paint to enhance his warrior-like appearance, he takes great pleasure in his sister’s snubbing of her unappreciated admirer. At Tuffnut’s command, Belch ignites a plume of Barf’s gas, leaving a singed Snotlout in his wake as he and Ruffnut fly off with their prize. The male half of the twins is the same misbehaved adolescent he was when we first met him in the original film. All of the other contestants in this race wear face paint like he does, to visually enhance the spirit of competition among them. Yet all of that energy is channeled into a relatively harmless game, not into war, as it was when
Vikings and dragons routinely killed each other. Aggression has been largely tamed. Courage and ambition are poured into strenuous but non-lethal pursuits.

With their rivals in hot pursuit, the nutty twins deposit their prize in their appointed net, like knocking a billiard ball into a pocket. The net is nearly full. Another contains only a few sheep, and several more are empty. Since when did the twins become the best dragon riders in Berk? One of the sheep at the bottom of their net calmly chews its cud, none the worse for wear. This is not a bloodthirsty sport, though judging from the behavior of Snotlout and Fishlegs, there is more at stake than audience approval and a trophy.

Stoick tallies the score: nine for the twins, three for Astrid, none each for Snotlout, Fishlegs and Hiccup. A drawing of the Night Fury’s head decorates the backboard of Hiccup’s net, but neither is present. Surely they will assert their dominance in a thrilling, last-minute, come-from-behind victory. But for the moment Hiccup is “nowhere to be found,” remarks his disappointed father. Gobber, always inclined to speak truth to power, speculates the Chief scared his son away with “the Big Talk.” Does he refer to a father/son discussion about sex? That’s often what “the Big Talk” signifies, but not in this case. Hiccup and his fellow dragon riders are no longer adolescents.

Riding Stormfly, Astrid quizzes Snotlout about why he handed the prize to Ruffnut. He’s helmet-over-heels infatuated with the female twin, despite the fact that, according to his former object of affection, she once tried to bury him alive. “Only for a few hours,” Snotlout protests, defending the honor of his beloved. Love is blind, especially in the young and passionate. The teenagers from *How to Train Your Dragon* are no longer kids. Snotlout’s and Fishleg’s romantic pursuit of Ruffnut is much more passionate than was Snotlout’s schoolboy flirtation with Astrid.
Colorfully painted for the competition, like their riders, the dragons swoop into and out of their spacious, well-equipped stables while narrator Hiccup explains that five years have passed since we last visited Berk. The village appears stable, secure and vibrant since dragons were accepted into Viking society. Foreshadowing events to come, one unruly baby dragon innocently launches an uncontrolled fireball that sets ablaze one part of the Viking-built stables. Not so long ago, *all* Viking buildings were *deliberately* torched by *adult* dragons who knew exactly what they were doing. Ever vigilant, Astrid rides to the rescue, tipping a strategically positioned bucket of water onto the fire. “Even top-of-the-line fire prevention, if I do say so myself,” brags the narrator. Presumably Hiccup invented the fire extinguisher too. His reputation as an underachiever is long past. As for Astrid, she’s as civic-minded as ever, even during a spirited contest for personal glory. She’d make a fine Chief, if women were allowed to occupy that high office. In Cressida Cowell’s original stories the Bog-Burglar tribe, neighbors of Vikings from Berk, has a female Chief.

It’s the last lap of the race, with the coveted black sheep up for grabs to determine the winner. At Stoick’s command, that climactic event is loudly trumpeted through an enormous blow horn shaped like a Whispering Death dragon. These are the best of times for Berk, judging by this opening scene. But the worst of times are not far away. Hiccup’s mysterious absence already hints at some kind of trouble in paradise.

In former days a catapult might have been employed to launch lethal projectiles at attacking dragons. Now it’s used to launch a black sheep skyward as part of a game. Astrid is poised to grab it, until Snotlout pre-empts her and in turn tosses the prize to his “darling,” Ruffnut. She accepts his tribute with no trace of gratitude or graciousness. Astrid is puzzled by Fishleg’s and
Snotlout’s attraction to Ruffnut. Their devotion costs them victory, just as Snotlout’s flirtation with Astrid cost him dearly during dragon training five years earlier. Equally reminiscent of the past, bickering between the twins costs them dearly, allowing Astrid to steal their prize. She’s always been more focused on the task at hand than are her easily distracted friends. While snatching the black sheep from her rivals, she and Stormfly perform an aerial maneuver worthy of Hiccup and Toothless. Stoick, unable to root for his absent son, cheers wildly instead for “my future daughter-in-law!” Guess that dispels any doubts about Astrid’s feelings for the young hero she kissed at the end of the first movie—a romance that didn’t progress much in the TV episodes.

Snotlout and Fishlegs knock each other out of the competition by colliding in mid-air, allowing Astrid to deposit the winning sheep in her net. Stoick rejoices. Standing next to him is Snotlout’s disappointed father, who nevertheless applauds politely for the victor. Competitive impulses are safely contained within a civilized code of behavior, despite the warlike face paint worn by the competitors. Narrator Hiccup sums up, “Berk is pretty much perfect. All of my hard work. And it’s a good thing too, because with Vikings on the backs of dragons, the world just got a whole lot bigger.” When such optimism is expressed at the beginning of a fairy tale, you know there’s trouble ahead. Still, victorious Astrid and Stormfly perpetuate our feeling of joyful, youthful confidence by soaring into the wild blue yonder the same way Hiccup and Toothless did at the end of How to Train Your Dragon. Leaving behind her cheering fans and disappointed rivals, Astrid pursues a much bigger prize. There seems no limit to her world.

Nor to the world of Hiccup, the prize Astrid pursues in the next scene, which contains the film’s opening credits accompanied by pulse-pounding music that sends us hurtling over ocean
with the hero and his dragon. From their viewpoint we get an exhilarating impression of limitless mobility in a boundless world.

The passage of five years has brought many changes to Hiccup, seen here riding Toothless as they skim the waves at blazing speed, kicking up a watery wake, outpacing fast-swimming creatures that look like a cross between dragons and whales flying through the water on giant wings. Sitting upright in his saddle, Hiccup switches gears (the position of his dragon’s mechanical tail wing), executes a perfect spin move, dips neatly beneath the raised tailfin of a sea creature and, with a cry of victory, bolts straight up into the sky. But why is he way out here by himself instead of dragon racing with his friends back home? Except for his physical appearance, the Hiccup we see in this scene resembles the solitary teenager we saw flying with Toothless, his only friend, before he reconciled dragons and Vikings in the first film.

Fuelled by the music, a wordless version of the song “Where No One Goes,” young Viking and young dragon virtually dance among the clouds, in complete physical control of themselves, masters of their environment. After another rapid ascent into the heavens, following a dizzying spin move, Hiccup loosens up on the reigns and lets Toothless plummet seaward, upside down. It’s a maneuver deliberately reminiscent of an early flight they made in Dragon, when Hiccup lost his cheat sheet and his tether to the dragon, Toothless lost the use of his artificial tail wing and both came close to dying in a frightening, uncontrolled plunge towards the earth. But such is not the case this time.

Reasserting control he never really lost, Hiccup resumes his acrobatics with Toothless, stretching out his arms in imitation of the dragon’s wings and relishing his mastery of flight. They spot a flock of gigantic Timberjacks soaring serenely overhead, inspiring Hiccup’s next
move. "What do you think, Bud? You want to give this another shot?" Whatever "this" is, Toothless seems less than thrilled at the prospect. Hiccup reassures him all will go well. Why would we doubt the young Viking who just amazed us with dazzling aerial acrobatics?

Hiccup locks the dragon's tail wing at full extension (a technological improvement carried over from "Gift of the Night Fury") and releases his safety harness. The last time that harness came lose in flight, five years ago, he nearly died. Hiccup rolls his left shoulder and cocks his head, both confident gestures of determination, then slides smoothly off the back of his dragon and plummets solo towards the sea far below.

Hiccup looks different than he did in the first movie. He's taller now, though we can't fully gauge his height until we see him standing next to Astrid, who used to the taller of the two. And he's clad head to foot in a new flight suit, with a flight helmet that mimics the spines on Toothless' head. Pads broaden his shoulders. The right pad is decorated with a ferocious red dragon head insignia. Cool costume. Hiccup looks like a young warrior in a suit of armor, with straps and studs adding to the effect. We can assume he designed the flight suit, as he did Toothless's saddle in the first movie. And he fills it out more impressively than he could have five years ago. No longer a scrawny teenager, he is now a lanky young man, full of energy, self-assurance and daring. The "Ugly Duckling" has become a swan.

Falling headfirst towards the ocean at breakneck speed, Hiccup yells with joy rather than panic. Toothless, however, protectively shadows his friend's rapid descent. Another exultant cry of "Yeah!" comes from Hiccup as he and his dragon circle each other in perfect harmony. Toothless responds to Hiccup's wide-eyed joy with a toothless grin, his forked tongue flapping in the wind. The bond of friendship and trust between these two characters seems unassailable, at present.
Reaching down to pull a strap on his flight suit, Hiccup releases artificial wings extending from his wrists to his ankles. Stretching his arms out wide, he catches the air in those wings and bolts upward, still far above the waves. He’s now soaring on his own, gliding beneath the dragon’s sheltering wing. Viewed from behind, they’re an amazing pair. Hiccup’s singular boot is counterpointed by his artificial left foot, matched by Toothless’s artificial tail wing juxtaposed with his natural wing. These two friends reduce their “disabilities” to nonsense. They’re an inspiring sight, to say the least.

Happy surprises keep coming. Turning a dial on his suit, Hiccup releases an artificial dorsal fin along his spine, in effect a rudder that gives him better control of his flight. From far beneath them we gaze up at man and dragon soaring as serenely as the flock of Timberjacks we saw moments earlier. Is anything beyond the reach of this pair? As Hiccup told us earlier, “With Vikings on the backs of dragons, the world just got bigger.”

Hiccup glances back at Toothless, who is surprised and impressed at his friend’s achievement. Together they skim the top of a cloud the way they skimmed the surface of the ocean. Toothless lets loose three celebratory plasma blasts just ahead of Hiccup, who easily dodges them—something he was unable to do at the end of their first successful flight together in How to Train Your Dragon. No singed face this time, thanks to his self-styled wings. Nearly everything we’ve seen so far in Dragon 2 represents an improvement in Viking/dragon relations, cooperation and skill since the first film.

“This is amazing!” shouts Hiccup, his signature expression of triumph, as he soars through a cloud. Emerging on the other side, however, he spots a rocky edifice looming ahead. “No longer amazing!” the free glider corrects himself, then calls out for help. Remember Rapunzel’s sudden
retrenchment after her initial exultation upon first touching the ground outside her tower. Finding or creating one’s bigger and better self is seldom a smooth journey. Whipping his artificial tail-wing, which reminds us of his dependence on Hiccup, Toothless catches up to his less maneuverable buddy and blasts part of the obstacle away from Hiccup’s glide path.

After sharing acrobatic thrills with these two characters, we now share their experience of crash landing among trees at the top of a high cliff just beyond the rock edifice they barely avoided. Hiccup survives the crash unharmed for the same reason he survived the fiery end of the Red Death. He is wrapped in the protective shell of a dragon’s wings. The first part of Hiccup to emerge from that shell is his artificial foot--another reminder of that perilous crash landing five years ago. He quickly switches from flying foot to walking foot--no doubt one of the technological “tweaks” he hinted at in Dragon.

The crash landing following a potentially fatal collision tempers our initial impression of Hiccup and Toothless as masters of their destiny. Despite their aeronautical progress and the general state of peace, harmony and progress back on Berk, the world remains a place of uncertainty. Not that Hiccup is willing to acknowledge that fact. Standing up and brushing himself off, he remarks casually, “Wooo! That really came out of nowhere.” Toothless, who bore the brunt of their crash landing, is slower to recover. Best friends they are, but it’s easy to take a friend for granted, as Hiccup does Toothless.

The rock formation they avoided, and which Toothless weakened with a plasma blast, collapses behind them. Hiccup barely notices. Toothless grumbles audibly about their close call. Instead of acknowledging his responsibility for causing their near-disaster, Hiccup lays the blame on his partner’s poor solo flying and “sloppy rescue maneuvers.” The boy who was so
down on himself at the beginning of Dragon is now a tad full of himself. It’s one of the dangers of success. But as we soon discover, his overconfidence in flying maneuvers masks a much deeper self-doubt about other matters related to his current absence from Berk.

Hiccup removes his helmet, revealing his face to us for the first time in five years. It’s the face of a young man rather than a boy, with whisker stubble on his chin, longer hair and no trace of the old teenage scowl of discontent. Walking to the edge of the cliff while holding his flight helmet like a modern-day pilot, Hiccup gazes out over a misty, mountainous, forested landscape below, gleaming in the northern sunlight. It’s a spectacular new world.

“Looks like we found another one,” Hiccup tells Toothless, suggesting they’ve made many such discoveries during their journeys far from Berk. Hiccup is equal parts scientist, inventor, artist and explorer. He is not just, or even primarily, a warrior. Thanks to his partnership with Toothless, he is able to seek out, record and depict the far-flung worlds the power of flight allows him to reach. It’s his passion. But it’s also a pursuit that deliberately takes him away from his father and Berk, to the consternation of Stoick.

Angry about Hiccup’s failure to acknowledge the peril they only avoided because of the dragon’s self-sacrifice, Toothless spits a pebble at the back of his partner’s head, then peevishly looks away from Hiccup. These characters have come a long way since the early days of their acquaintance, when they had to tread lightly around each other to avoid giving serious offense. Bickering and teasing are now acceptable behavior between them. Hiccup describes his buddy as a “big baby-poo” who pouts when he doesn’t get his way. He grabs the dragon around the neck and pretends to wrestle with him while mocking his demand for an apology. “Are you feelin’ it yet? Pickin’ up on all my heartfelt remorse?” Toothless is unmoved. In playful
retaliation he stands and casually waddles over to the edge of the cliff, dangling his partner over the precipice. Hiccup is properly chastised, frightened just enough to satisfy his chuckling friend that the point is made about who rescued whom from their latest mishap. Yet the dragon’s mechanical tail wing, raised to counter-balance the Viking hanging from his neck, is a reminder that Hiccup once rescued him from a desperate situation.

With a mild roar of victory, Toothless falls onto his back with Hiccup lying on top of him, then rolls over and pins Hiccup to the ground. The young man plays along, pretending to exchange blows in a fake renewal of the old Viking/dragon animosity. It’s all in good fun. Memories of past hatreds and battles have been reduced to an entertaining game between friends: It’s Cowboys versus Indians the only way it should be played. But unbeknownst to both characters, this warmhearted exhibition of mutual trust will be severely tested by events to come.

Plopping his big head onto Hiccup’s comparatively small chest, Toothless ends the contest in his favor. Hiccup concedes defeat, enjoying every second of their horseplay, except for the slurping, dog-like licks of forgiveness and affection delivered to his face and flight suit. Escaping the gooey onslaught, Hiccup complains, “You know that doesn’t wash out.” Toothless chortles with satisfaction. Hiccup gets a little revenge by flicking a wad of dragon saliva back into the dragon’s face. Only slightly annoyed, Toothless cleans himself like a cat. Two pals working out their minor differences with good-natured sparring, they are completely at ease with each other.

From within his flight suit Hiccup retrieves and unfolds a hand-drawn map of the known Viking world. With his partner’s cooperation (dragon saliva is good for something), he glues a new page onto it. Pulling out a drawing tool from his well-equipped utility belt, he adds details of his latest geographical discovery to the ever-expanding map. “What should we name it?” he
asks Toothless, who is preoccupied with licking and biting under one of his forelegs. "Itchy armpit it is" Hiccup announces, making a joke out of their different perspectives and priorities. Friendship between two such different creatures requires compromise, tolerance, ingenuity and a highly developed sense of humor. The same is often true of friendships between humans. At any rate, Hiccup’s little joke proceeds from a long and comfortable familiarity with his dragon.

Puzzled by his friend’s new preoccupation, Toothless sniffs at the map while Hiccup draws their latest discovery on it. The dragon does not comprehend Hiccup’s interest in maps, yet respects it because it seems important to the Viking. Hiccup speculates they might even find another Night Fury on this new island. "Wouldn’t that be something?" he ponders. Yes, it would. But if he thought it through, he might realize the discovery of other Night Furies could intrude a rival into their friendship. Friends and lovers don’t always mix well when competing for attention.

Should we “just keep goin’?” Hiccup asks Toothless as they scan the new island. The dragon rumbles in apparent agreement. Hiccup is restless, as he was in the first film when he proposed taking a permanent vacation with Toothless in order to avoid killing a Nightmare in the arena. But why this time? Berk is no longer a threat to Toothless, and Hiccup is a respected member of the community. Why would Hiccup want to flee the world he transformed for the better?

Both heads turn to look behind them, in the direction opposite their journey of exploration and instead back towards Berk, to watch the arrival of Astrid and Stormfly. The romance implied at the end of Dragon makes a curiously delayed appearance in the sequel. And it’s Astrid who does the pursuing this time, in contrast to Hiccup’s awkward and rejected first attempts in Dragon. By leaving home at the moment of her dragon racing triumph to pursue her romantic relationship
with Hiccup, Astrid steps over her own threshold to adventure. Dragon racing victories are no longer sufficient to satisfy her dreams. Hiccup greets Astrid playfully as "milady," a rather quaint salutation, but with genuine feeling. They have forged their own, private language of love, far beyond their awkward verbal exchanges in the first movie.

Toothless gallops over to the new arrivals. After a cursory greeting of Astrid, he exchanges a much more elaborate, enthusiastic, dragon-style greeting with Stormfly. In spite of his close friendship with Hiccup, Toothless obviously misses the company of other dragons, And though our attention returns to the young Vikings for the rest of this scene, we're occasionally made aware of the two dragons getting reacquainted nearby. Separate interactions between the two couples, if we can refer to the dragons as such, reminds us that the relationship between our hero and his dragon is, after all, a fantasy—a fairy tale. And if that fantasy, however essential it is to his well-being, precludes his interaction with fellow human beings, it hinders rather than promotes his maturity.

Like Hiccup, Astrid appears older, more mature than in *Dragon*. Also like Hiccup, she’s brimming with youthful confidence. Responding to his question about where’s she’s been, Astrid replies nonchalantly, "Winning races. What else?" The intimacy and trust between them is obvious from their demeanor. Astrid leans on Hiccup’s shoulder while lowering herself to the ground next to him. He makes room for her as if they’ve done this a thousand times before. He touches her arm with his hand—another little action that is unselfconscious. Neither character knew each other well enough for such familiarities five years ago. Now they’re an experienced couple, and it shows.

Astrid returns Hiccup’s question, “Where have you been?” Without hesitating he opens up to
her about a personal problem. “Avoiding my dad,” he replies. “Oh, no. What happened now?” Astrid inquires, her tone of voice informing us this is only the latest in a long series of disputes between father and son. Hiccup is relieved to discuss this one with someone he trusts. Toothless can help him avoid his daddy issues, but not confront them.

As interesting as the dialog in this scene is the characters’ non-verbal communication. When Hiccup launches into his latest complaint about Stoick, Astrid reaches for his pencil and he automatically hands it to her without breaking verbal stride. Gazing out at the newly discovered island, she adds details to Hiccup’s map. It’s the equivalent of completing each other’s sentences. They are a well-oiled team. She listens to his story while making her contribution to his cartography. Meanwhile, Toothless and Stormfly engage in their own private horseplay. Similar male/female interactions in different species are presented side-by-side. We can only guess at what is transpiring between the dragons.

Hiccup’s beef with Stoick is that dear old dad wants him to grow up faster and accept the responsibilities of adulthood. The son’s morning began like so many others before it, full of the promise of adventure. “All is right with the world” is Hiccup’s way of describing a perpetual state of late childhood. Until Stoick interrupts their breakfast with, “We need to talk”—seldom a promising prelude to any parent/child communication. Standing up and lowering his voice to imitate Stoick’s, Hiccup savagely mocks his father’s sober demeanor, as he did near the end of the first scene in Dragon. But this time Hiccup’s gift for mockery is playfully challenged by Astrid’s equally perceptive imitation of him. Using his voice, she portrays him claiming the right to continue his life of “goofing off.” Like Hiccup and Toothless fake fighting in a harmless parody of the old Viking/dragon war, only trusted friends can get away with behavior like this.
Astrid seems to be siding with Stoick, though with sufficient good humor to render her criticism harmless, for the most part.

Hiccup protests Astrid’s pinched, nasal impersonation of his voice and her exaggerated shoulder movements. But he does so with a smile, enjoying her performance at least a little. He resumes his impersonation of Stoick to finish making his point, adding a little pompous choreography to enhance the effect. Striding self-importantly past Astrid, Hiccup’s version of Stoick expresses fatherly pride in his son’s achievements. But that’s just a set-up for the larger, contrary point Hiccup wants to make. Before he can do so, however, Astrid again intrudes her rendition of Hiccup, this time reacting to Stoick’s praise. “Aww, thank’s Dad. I’m pretty impressed with myself too.” Does she think her boyfriend is a little too pleased with himself? Overconfident? That would make her criticism equivalent to Toothless spitting a pebble at the back of Hiccup’s head when the young Viking failed to admit his solo gliding was reckless.

It can be humbling to see one’s self through the eyes of someone else. Hiccup once again takes issue with the quality of Astrid’s impersonation and avoids addressing the content of her criticism. What’s with the big hand gestures, he wants to know, unwittingly validating them by using the same gestures to protest hers, as she gleefully points out. The master mocker from Dragon is out-mocked by a woman who has gotten to know him, and all his quirks, very well.

More seriously now, though still grinning, Hiccup gently restrains Astrid’s twitching shoulders and hands so he can finish his gripe about Stoick. She recognizes his more insistent tone and respectfully backs off. A good friend knows how far she can push without causing real offense. How much more intimately these two characters know each other in Dragon 2 than they did in Dragon. Hiccup stands up and resumes his impersonation of Stoick. Making a brief appearance
behind him, Toothless and Stormfly continue their own competitive yet flirtatious interaction, oblivious of and to their riders.

Striding, gesturing and speaking again in an exaggerated, regal manner, Hiccup’s Stoick declares that paternal pride has inspired him to … “To make you Chief!” interrupts Astrid, unable to keep her promise to remain quiet so Hiccup can finish making his point. No longer mocking Hiccup, she is thrilled for him. “That’s amazing!” she adds, echoing his favorite expression of joy but with a very different idea of what is just cause for such happiness. She cheerfully punches Hiccup in the stomach for emphasis. Rough love, Viking style, carried over from the first movie and the TV series. It’s just her way.

Astrid’s prideful punch activates Hiccup’s artificial dorsal fin, which ironically is symbolic of what he finds “amazing” (soaring the skies with Toothless and exploring new worlds, not being Chief of Berk). If anyone is eager to take on the responsibilities of being Chief, it’s Astrid. But she isn’t the Chief’s daughter. Besides, this is primarily Hiccup’s fairy tale. Achieving royal status is more about him gaining control over his own life than about running everyone else’s

Separate worlds collide. Stormfly’s playful pursuit of Toothless intrudes on Astrid and Hiccup, knocking them to the ground. Astrid lands on top of Hiccup. The last time they were in this position was at the training arena in Berk, with Ruffnut and Tuffnut on hand to supply immature sexual taunts. But Hiccup and Astrid are grown-up now. They know how they feel about each other and don’t need to tiptoe around it with juvenile jokes. Astrid simply helps Hiccup off the ground and brushes him off. The contrast between similar actions in this movie and its predecessor provides a measure of how much these two characters have grown.

What follows is a serious, adult conversation about the implications of Stoick’s offer to make
Hiccup the Chief of Berk. Hiccup frankly admits avoiding a commitment. Astrid frankly points out the great responsibility of being Chief. Hiccup’s map-making and flight time would have to be curtailed. “I’ll need to fly Toothless, since you’ll be too busy,” Astrid remarks, then turns to face Hiccup, suddenly realizing the significance of what she just said. There’s an unspoken question in her eyes, or perhaps several questions. Can Hiccup give up some of his precious time with Toothless? Does his friendship with the dragon mean more to him than she, Stoick and Berk do? Hiccup hesitates before answering. And when he does, he obfuscates.

Hiccup spent much of his childhood as a loner, estranged from his father, deprived of his mother, without close friends his own age. Toothless was the first creature to acknowledge and accept him as a friend, eventually to the point of great mutual trust and loyalty. Cutting back on that relationship in order to give speeches, make plans and run the village is “not me,” Hiccup claims. It’s something he believes comes naturally to Stoick. Astrid points out what an honor it would be to become Chief. “I’d be pretty excited,” she admits. And based on evidence in both movies, she would probably be very good at it.

“I’m not like you,” Hiccup responds. “You know exactly who you are. You always have. But I’m still looking. I know that I’m not my father. And I never met my mother. So what does that make me?” He says this in a serious, no longer mocking tone of voice while walking away from Astrid, retrieving his flight helmet and sitting back down, pencil in hand, beside his map—things representing the solitary life with which he’s familiar and comfortable. Briefly visible in the background are Toothless and Stormfly engaged in a friendly tug of war over a tree branch. A fitting metaphor for the struggle going on within Hiccup, whose recent daredevil flight with Toothless was in part a flight from the traditional Viking role Stoick wants him to play back
home. His bravado in flight compensates for his deep insecurity about replacing Stoick. Or, to put it in different terms, his deep insecurity about becoming a mature adult.

Astrid pursues Hiccup, again, as she did by tracking him to this island. She sits down beside him and plays affectionately with his hair. Her loyalty is persistent. "What you're searching for isn't out there, Hiccup," she gently explains while gesturing to the new island he discovered. "It's in here," she adds, placing her hand over his heart. He smiles, acknowledging her attempt to reassure him. "Maybe you just don't see it yet" is her way of counseling patience. Five years ago she had no patience whatsoever for his incompetence in the dragon training arena. Now she's more than willing to wait for him to figure things out in his own time. She too has grown up.

Astrid kisses Hiccup on the cheek but gets a mouthful of dragon slobber in return, which humorously distances her and us a little from this intimate moment between them. Then something more serious disrupts their private interlude, and coincidently allows Hiccup to again avoid a subject he doesn't want to face. A plume of smoke rises from a distant part of the island. Hiccup notices it first, then mentions it to Astrid. She thinks he's still searching for himself out there and reacts with mild annoyance, until he re-directs her gaze to the distant smoke. We can see a reflection of the island in Astrid's now wide-open eyes—a nice touch by the film's animators. The facial expressions of both characters turn serious. They are of like mind again, because in their experience any encounter with the unknown has potentially serious consequences for their Viking world. Investigating the mysterious smoke is not a matter of satisfying private curiosity, or "goofing off" as Astrid described it earlier. It's acting responsibility on behalf of Berk.
Hiccup’s flight from Berk is another heroic journey away from home and to the threshold of adventure and discovery. And like the departures of Rapunzel from Mother Gothel’s tower in Tangled, and Hiccup from his father’s house in How to Train Your Dragon, it’s a complicated and in some ways contradictory journey. By fleeing the responsibility Stoick would thrust upon him, Hiccup in a sense returns to a form of childhood—to endless adventure and exploration with Toothless, without the mundane, day-to-day speech-making and planning expected of a village Chief. On the other hand, those explorations include serious scientific investigation and cartographic recording. He is not merely “goofing off.” And a case can be made that without the next exploratory journey he makes, Hiccup would not ultimately face the final test of becoming an adult. So whatever his motive for leaving Berk in Dragon 2, that departure proves essential to his eventually taking charge of his own life.

The addition of a vocal component to the background music echoes the gravity of their mission as we accompany Hiccup, Astrid and their dragons across the island and towards the smoke of unknown origin. They pass over gold-leafed treetops into a region of leafless, charred tree trunks—evidence of some recent cataclysm. Moving out over open water, they spot a gigantic, spiky formation of blue-green ice on the opposite shore. At closer range we see shattered remnants of manmade structures embedded in that unnatural ice mountain heaved up out of the ground. Sensing danger, Hiccup orders Astrid to “stay close” but remain behind him. He is already, if unconsciously, playing the protective role of village Chief while assuming the primary risk himself.

Toothless reacts nervously to the sight of giant dragon footprints in the ground beneath the ice-imbedded ruins. Does he sense not just the immediate danger they’re about to encounter but the
much bigger threat that lies behind it—a threat that will imperil both his identity and his friendship with Hiccup? Astrid spots people on the ground before Hiccup does, but because he and Toothless are between her and them, he recognizes the danger they pose first. A capture net fired from a catapult on the ground ensnares Stormfly, knocking her out of the sky. Hiccup and Toothless rescue Astrid before she falls to her death. Stormfly, despite putting up a spirited battle, is quickly subdued by a group of dragon trapping pirates.

Hiccup, Astrid and Toothless land to rescue Stormfly. Hiccup intimidates the hostile pirates with a flaming sword he pulls from his flight suit. It’s reminiscent of and may have been inspired by Luke Skywalker’s light saber in Star Wars. Is it a mere rip-off? Not really. Skywalker inherited his light saber from a wise old Jedi knight named Obi-wan-Kenobi. It was a weapon and symbol of ancient tradition. Hiccup’s flaming sword is his own invention, more symbolic of his new, progressive outlook than of Viking tradition. He uses it to keep the aggressive strangers at bay, not to slay them. And they are duly impressed. To the film animators’ credit, we can see thermal distortion surrounding Hiccup’s flaming sword, making the heat seem more real.

The leader of the pirates is Eret, who recognizes Toothless as a Night Fury—a rare and valuable prize for the alpha male Eret serves, the mysterious Drago Bludvist. In a sense Drago is to Eret what Stoick is to Hiccup—a figure of paternal authority. But Drago, more like Mother Gothel, is a selfish, cruel, exploitive, immature parent. And unlike Hiccup, Eret has not yet freed himself from Drago’s fearful dominance, achieving independence for himself. To be sure, Hiccup hasn’t entirely freed himself from Stoick either, yet he successfully changed his father’s and his village’s opinion of dragons. To a degree, Eret resembles Flynn Rider in Tangled. Both will learn valuable lessons from the heroes of their stories, after starting out as enemies.
It can’t be a coincidence that Drago’s name consists of the first five letters in “dragon.” He is the evil counterpart to the good that Hiccup and now the other Vikings of Berk see in dragons: the evil that Stoick originally insisted was all there was in dragons.

Eret speaks with an English cockney accent, different from the Scottish brogue of the Berk adults and the more Americanized English of Hiccup and his fellow teens. These differences help distinguish the groups from each other. They see their worlds differently.

Eret mistakenly accuses Hiccup and his fellow “do-gooder” dragon riders of stealing the pirates’ captive dragons and destroying their fort. Like the dragons in the first movie who steal the Vikings’ livestock in order to feed the insatiable appetite of a more powerful beast that would otherwise devour them, the pirates are obliged to serve a superior force who demands, under threat of torture and death, that they supply him with dragons. Hiccup is confused, realizing for the first time there are dragon riders other than Berk’s. Eret makes no distinction between the two groups. They’re all a threat to him and his tribe, who fear the all-powerful Drago.

Hiccup pleads innocent to the charges laid against him by this “strange, hostile person whom we’ve never met,” a description implicitly criticizing Eret for his unreasonable behavior. He merely wants Stormfly returned, after which he and Astrid will peacefully depart. But Eret refuses to accept the stranger’s denial of guilt.

If fear of becoming Chief of Berk conversely fuelled Hiccup’s reckless bravado during aerial acrobatics with Toothless, fear of Drago does the same for Eret in this scene. Drawing his sword, Eret threatens to take the Night Fury captive. Having faced down much bigger threats, including the Red Death, Hiccup confidently announces his immediate departure. Eret and his pirates attack the Vikings and their dragons, but the contest is over quickly. Freeing Stormfly while
Toothless distracts their foes with plasma blasts, Hiccup and Astrid fly off victoriously with their dragons.

In his frustration at being bested by Hiccup, Eret retaliates by threatening him with the power of Drago, who also happens to be a threat to the pirate. In order to intimidate the young Viking who so easily outmaneuvered him, Eret even reveals the deep scar Drago once painfully carved into his chest. In other words he draws strength from that which he fears, which, we later discover, is precisely what Drago did when dragons devastated his world. For Eret, the mysterious monster who threatens and controls his life becomes a symbol of his own power in a contest with Hiccup. In *How to Train Your Dragon* the Vikings of Berk decorated their village and ships with images of the beasts they feared and hated, drawing courage from effigies of their worst enemy. Drago represents, in one sense, the worst in Eret, as the Stabbington Brothers represented the worst in Flynn Rider.

Back on Berk the aerial acrobatics continue long after the dragon races have ended. The young participants are blissfully ignorant of the threat to which Hiccup and Astrid, thanks to their far flung travels, have been alerted. Swooping past village elder Gothi, who is hanging out her laundry while surrounded by an affectionate flock of tiny Terrible Terrors she treats like adopted children, Snotlout causes a ruckus. It’s typical prankish behavior by a young Viking who has not quite grown up. Supposedly irresponsible goof-off Hiccup, by contrast, has just discovered a new island and a possible threat to Berk.

At ground level we connect with older Vikings going about their daily business, equally oblivious to the lurking threat of Drago. Stoick strolls through the village, informally greeting his fellow citizens. No bowing and scraping to *this* leader. But we’ll see plenty of both in Drago’s
imperial realm. Stoick greets Snotnout’s disappointed father. “Great race” observes the Chief. His rival disagrees, but without rancor. Berk is a fairly egalitarian society. Even when, back in the first movie, the Chief solicited volunteers to accompany him on a dangerous mission to search for the dragons’ nest, he maneuvered rather than forced the citizens of Berk. That will not be the case in Drago’s realm.

At the blacksmith shop Stoick discretely, as though to hide his shame, inquires if Gobber has seen Hiccup. “He’s probably flown over the edge of the world by now” speculates the Chief’s closest friend. Gobber’s criticism of Hiccup’s wanderlust is ironically undercut, at least for us, by his ignorance of Earth’s true shape--something an inquisitive explorer like Hiccup might someday figure out. Gobber further speculates that Hiccup might not be the logical choice to become Chief after Stoick retires. Stoick is convinced otherwise. “The pride of Berk,” he defiantly asserts as Hiccup and Astrid finally return home. “Who finally decided to show up for work,” adds Gobber by way of sarcastic counterpoint. It’s a greeting similar to the one he extended to Hiccup in the first scene of Dragon, when the young apprentice arrived late for work during a dragon attack. The implication is that Hiccup’s focus is still on his private quest rather than on the tasks assigned to him by his employer, his father and his community. He’s still searching for himself out there.

Something else that hasn’t changed as much in the last five years as we might have expected is the communication gap between father and son. In fact, the two characters seemed better able to understand each other at the end of Dragon than they do now. While Hiccup tries to warn his father about Eret and Drago, the Chief insists on preparing his son to take his place by acquainting him with the more mundane aspects of serving the citizens of Berk. Their disjointed
conversation resembles the one they had in *Dragon* when Stoick announced Hiccup’s entry into the dragon training program while Hiccup tried to get out of it. Think of Rapunzel and Mother Gothel talking at cross-purposes about Rapunzel’s upcoming birthday.

Filling saddle orders for villagers is one example of a Chief’s routine duties. On the other hand, Gobber casually dousing a fire in his shop inadvertently caused by his dragon, Grumpy, is an example of an ordinary activity in the present day functioning of Berk that would not have been so if Hiccup had not been inquisitive and adventurous, five years earlier. And the same goes for Gobber replacing a dragon’s excised tooth with a metal one. Hiccup’s flight suit seems unsuited to the workaday chores Gobber and Stoick would have him perform. But his elders sometimes fail to appreciate the benefits that have resulted from his dreamy, distracted explorations outside the box that was once Viking tradition. Berk is not the place it was before Hiccup forged peace between Vikings and dragons.

When Hiccup announces the discovery of a new island, Fishlegs is eager to know if he found any new species of dragon. That’s *his* primary interest in life, aside from wooing Ruffnut. Supported by Astrid, Hiccup tells Stoick about an island of hostile dragon trappers whose fort was recently destroyed by giant spikes of ice that Eret blames on the Vikings of Berk. If Hiccup inclines to be a dreamer who shirks domestic duties, Stoick and Gobber are sometimes blinded by their narrow focus on those same duties. The blacksmith scolds his apprentice for inviting trouble into their lives. Stoick agrees. “Best we keep to our own” he advises Hiccup, forgetting the fact that if his son had followed that advice five years ago, dragons would not be included among “our own.” Ignoring his son, the Chief employs a heat-powered saw to cut leather for a saddle requested by one of the villagers. Hiccup shuts down that saw to emphasize *his* point
about the threat of a dragon army being assembled by the mysterious man for whom the pirates slavishly work.

After dismissing Hiccup’s wanderings and warnings, Stoick, Gobber and other adult Vikings within earshot snap to attention upon hearing the name of the man linked to those warnings. Hiccup garbles the name Drago Bludvist as Dargo Bloodyfist, but it still triggers an alarm in the minds of Vikings old enough to remember an encounter with the mystery man. Suddenly their concern exceeds Hiccup’s. By contrast, Hiccup’s teenage compatriots, too young to remember Drago, react to the name with arrogance. “I’ll bloody his fist with my face!” Tuffnut absurdly declares, echoing an equally stupid remark Snotlout made about hostile dragons in the first movie. Both declarations are rooted in ignorance of the enemy they will face.

There is a generation gap in this scene based on differences in experience. In *How to Train Your Dragon*, Hiccup’s willingness to explore beyond the tradition of antagonism between Vikings and dragons allowed him to forge peace and even friendship between the warring parties. *Dragon 2* seems to be repeating that formula, with Drago as the new foe. But as events turn out, the formula will be turned on its head, complicating Hiccup’s difficult journey to maturity, responsibility and independence.

True to form, the twins descend into pointless sibling rivalry while Fishlegs and Snotlout resume their hopeless wooing of Ruffnut. They still occasionally lack the maturity and sense of priority that Hiccup and Astrid have acquired over the past half decade.

Finally taking his son’s warning seriously, Stoick charges into action, leaving behind daily routine and ordering emergency preparations for defense of the village against an anticipated attack. Gates are closed, storm doors are lowered and no one is permitted to leave the island until
Stoick authorizes it. Abandoned for the time being are any thoughts of his son taking over as Chief. As was the case early in *Dragon*, Hiccup finds himself largely ignored, trailing after his father in pursuit of information about Drago. Stoick pauses long enough only to describe the villain as a “madman, without conscience or mercy. And if he’s built a dragon army, gods help us all.” So Hiccup’s recent wanderlust has, at the very least, alerted Stoick and Berk to a danger they did not suspect was lurking *out there*. It seems unfair for the Chief to so cavalierly ignore his son both before and after learning about the return of Drago. No wonder Hiccup doubts his own ability to take on the responsibilities of being Chief. He’s not even regarded by Stoick as a worthy advisor.

The Chief’s treatment of Hiccup in this scene is analogous to the scene in the first movie where Hiccup tried to persuade his father that dragons are not the monsters Viking myth makes them out to be. Stoick refused to listen then, and refuses again now. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel tried to convince Mother Gothel she was ready to face the world outside their tower, and in return was treated like an ignorant, naïve, helpless child.

Late in *Dragon*, Stoick rejected Hiccup’s attempt to negotiate peace between dragons and Vikings. Now he rejects Hiccup’s advice to do the same with Drago. Both have prior experiences to back them up: Stoick’s with Drago and Hiccup’s with Toothless. Each is convinced he knows the right way to handle this new crisis. “Some minds won’t be changed, Hiccup. Berk is what you need to worry about. A Chief protects his own.” Five years ago Stoick’s “own” did not include dragons. Now it does. That should be a point in Hiccup’s favor. When Stoick moves out of the camera frame, his stern face, as seen from Hiccup’s point of view, is replaced by the face of Toothless, staring at Hiccup with wide-eyed inquisitiveness. It’s a reminder to Hiccup of the
former foe he transformed into a devoted friend. *His* past experience impels him to make peace, not war. It’s what he knows he does best, as opposed to what he fears (being Chief) he cannot do well at all.

Sensing Hiccup’s imminent rebellion, because she’s learned to read him so well, Astrid advises against it. Not so much because she agrees with the Chief, as was clearly the case early in *Dragon*, but out of concern for Hiccup’s safety. “I have to” responds her stubborn boyfriend, who gives her a quick, reassuring kiss on the cheek before defyng his father. As the gates to the dragon stables close, on orders from Stoick, Hiccup and Toothless make their escape. Following her heart rather than her head, Astrid pursues Hiccup on Stormfly. Her loyalty to him exceeds her obedience to the Chief, this time. But it’s a choice she will have to make on two more occasions in this film.

Hiccup’s departure from Berk, in defiance of Stoick, to find and confront Eret as a prelude to negotiating peace with Drago, is the second start of his heroic journey in *Dragon 2*. His earlier flight from home was primarily motivated by his desire to avoid the adult responsibilities of being Chief, because he doubted his ability to fulfill them. Now he leaves with a stronger sense of purpose, passionately opposing Stoick’s intransigent hostility towards a traditional foe.

Eret’s pirate ship sails out to sea against a monumental backdrop of rocky cliffs and sunlit mist. It’s a beautiful yet visually overwhelming land and seascape dwarfing man and his creations, yielding a stark impression of Nature’s dominance. The abrupt halt of music from the previous scene puts an exclamation point on that impression. The next shot, however, counterpoints the first. In close-up we see the ship’s bow plunging majestically through frigid water. Eret stands on that bow issuing orders to his crew. The power of human will and the
power of Nature now contend for dominance. But Eret’s will is not entirely his own. He urges his men to fill their vessel with captured dragons in order to placate Drago, their acknowledged master. And the ship itself depends on Nature’s wind for movement.

The presence of swashbuckling music in this scene encourages us to empathize with the pirates as they prepare to capture two fast-approaching dragons. For a moment Eret becomes a dashing, romantic figure of action, until we realize his targets are Toothless and Stormfly. When he recognizes Hiccup and Astrid aboard the dragons, Eret’s determination to capture them becomes a matter of personal revenge, not just a function of his indentured service to Drago. “You’re not getting away this time” he declares with a hint of Captain Ahab targeting the great white whale in *Moby Dick*. The metaphor becomes even more fitting when we meet Drago, whose obsession to conquer dragons and dominate humans verges on the pathological.

Nets launched by pirate catapults are easily evaded by the highly skilled dragons and their riders. But instead of launching a counterattack, the quartet lands on deck. Astrid brandishes her battleaxe. Eret brandishes his sword. Hiccup, to everyone’s surprise, promptly surrenders. With disarming calm he yields up a Night Fury, a Deadly Nadder and even his girlfriend, over whom he tosses one of the pirates’ capture nets. Astrid is puzzled and nervous. Toothless maintains a threatening posture towards the pirates. Clearly they were not informed of Hiccup’s plan. Yet he seems very confident of success, counting on the shock of his passivity to disarm his enemies. If averting his eyes and extending a blind hand of friendship to Toothless worked in *Dragon*, why shouldn’t a similar gesture of non-belligerence work now?

But there is a condition to Hiccup’s surrender. Brandishing their weapons, the pirates arouse Toothless’ defensive instincts. “There won’t be any trouble, unless you do *that*,” cautions Hiccup
from within the pirate cage he voluntarily enters. He adds an understated yet potent warning that
his captors could find their boat incinerated and themselves swimming for their lives if they
provoke the Night Fury. In other words, he speaks softly but carries a big stick. The sudden
appearance of Hiccup’s flaming sword thrusting up through the prison grate appears to be
another threat, until he surrenders it to Eret.

“How is this a plan?” questions a skeptical Astrid even as she plays along with it because she
trusts Hiccup. He, meanwhile, plays the pirates like an audience at a magic show, knowing
they’ll mishandle the flaming sword and be disoriented by it. Toothless, more at ease now, bats
playfully at floating sparks produced by the explosion the pirates inadvertently trigger. Stormfly
repeatedly fetches the sword after Eret, implicitly rejecting Hiccup’s peace offer, repeatedly
tosses it overboard. Childlike in their behavior, the dragons perform as Hiccup knew they would,
hoping they could help change Eret’s mind. He’s manipulating dragons and pirates the way he
manipulated Toothless and a Terrible Terror with reflected sunlight in the first movie.

“What game are you playing?” Eret demands, wary of his foe’s bizarre tactics. So Hiccup gets
to the point. He wants to meet Drago and “change his mind about dragons.” It’s a noble goal, if
rather glibly stated. The pirates laugh at Hiccup’s optimism, but Astrid defends him. “He can be
really persuasive.” Stormfly helps Hiccup’s cause by nudging the retrieved sword towards Eret’s
feet. Hiccup expands on the point the dragon is making. “Once you’ve earned his loyalty, there is
nothing a dragon won’t do for you.” The first step in making peace with Drago is to make peace
between Eret’s pirates and the dragons they are accustomed to enslaving.

In Dragon Hiccup failed miserably in his first attempt to persuade Stoick to make peace with
dragons. In Dragon 2 a more experienced and confident Hiccup adopts a less more subtle tactic
with Eret, employing both a carrot (surrender) and a stick (warning). And his willingness to risk
the safety of Astrid and their dragons is one measure of his (over?) confidence.

Eret doesn’t buy what Hiccup is selling, initially. Nonetheless, Hiccup’s unusual tactics
generate a pause in the violence, giving him an opportunity to reason with the enemy. He wants
to illustrate his offer with a practical demonstration of a dragon’s capacity for loyalty. Deploying
Toothless’ artificial tail wing, he seems about to take flight with his buddy. Will this be a repeat
of their gliding stunt, in which Toothless retrieves and rescues Hiccup? We never learn the
details of Hiccup’s plan or see Eret’s reaction to it. But at this delicate juncture there appears to
be an opening for negotiation and understanding between Viking and pirate, until Hiccup’s plan
is disrupted by an ill-timed if well-intentioned rescue mission by his father and friends. Like
Stoick’s interruption of Hiccup’s attempt to make friends with a wild Nightmare in the training
arena five years earlier, a rare opportunity is wasted.

Snotlout and Hookfang swoop down and snatch Hiccup off the deck of the pirate ship. Eret and
his crew immediately counter-attack. Unable to take flight by himself, Toothless climbs to the
top of the ship’s mast in an attempt to rescue his friend, until he recognizes Hiccup’s kidnappers
as allies. Though undeniably courageous, Snotlout’s heroic actions are complicated by his
romantic impulses. He offers his rescue of Hiccup as evidence to Ruffnut of his ability to
“protect and provide.” She remains unimpressed. But if she’s still part little girl who hates little
boys, her attitude changes in a heartbeat when she spots muscular, good-looking Eret operating a
catapult, firing nets at Vikings and their dragons. “Oh my! Me likey!” she declares her
infatuation with no subtlety whatsoever, and willingly surrenders herself to Eret’s net. By doing
so she ensnares Barf, Belch and her brother as well. And unlike Hiccup’s, Ruffnut’s surrender
contributes nothing to the greater good. She is passionate but still immature. More responsibly, Hiccup frees himself from Hook Fang’s grasp and, deploying his artificial wings, glides back to the ship. Equally responsible, Astrid stops Eret from firing a capture net at him. Hiccup does a little swashbuckling of his own while sliding down one of the ship’s sails. Fairy tales are, after all, part wish-fulfillment. We’d all like to be this competent and dashing in a crisis.

Gobber and Stoick arrive on Skull Crusher and Grumpy as part of the rescue effort, but Hiccup neither wants nor needs their help. Eret, much too confident in himself, is quickly, embarrassingly subdued by the veteran Viking warriors. Snotlout and Fishlegs share in the adult Viking triumph, looking every bit a physical match for the intimidated pirates. They certainly don’t look like teenagers training to be warriors any more. Grumpy, at Gobber’s command, traps Eret under his massive head, as Toothless did Hiccup during their mock battle earlier. It’s been no contest at all.

No contest, that is, until the real struggle begins. Cinching up his belt like John Wayne in an old western, Stoick turns on his son and commands, “You, saddle up. We’re going home,” leaving no room for debate. But Hiccup rejects that authority, as he did in the past. And when Stoick angrily accuses him of “irresponsible” behavior, Hiccup defends himself. Protecting “our dragons” and stopping a war is not irresponsible. Stoick insists that Drago wants war. The relationship between father and son has regressed to what it was five years ago, before Dragon’s happy ending, when they argued about whether dragons or Vikings had inflicted the most casualties on the other. At that point in Dragon, however, we had already seen Hiccup’s proof that dragons could be peaceful. Drago remains a mystery to us, and to Hiccup.

The breach between father and son never becomes as wide in this movie as it did in the first. In
Meade Hall, five years ago, Stoick simply rejected Hiccup’s argument, disowned the boy and walked away. This time, after failing to persuade Hiccup with the sheer force of his paternal authority, Stoick attempts to reason with him, explaining more fully, in the form of a flashback, his reasons for distrusting Drago.

Many years ago Drago came to Berk as “a stranger from a strange land.” Stoick’s description emotionally distances Drago from Vikings, as though the villain were from an alien species. Stoick once regarded dragons in the same fashion. Drago intruded on a meeting of village chiefs in Meade Hall, offering to free them from the dragon scourge if they would in return bow down to his authority. In other words he offered them security in exchange for slavery. The proud chiefs laughed at his absurd proposal. Returning to the present for a moment, we see the younger Vikings—Snotlout, Fishlegs and the twins, but notably neither Hiccup nor Astrid—react the same way. Their overconfidence is perhaps rooted in their astonishing victory over the Red Death at the end of the first movie, and their unfamiliarity with Drago in this one. But they are sobered by the conclusion of Stoick’s tale. After his proposal was rejected, Drago commanded his dragons to destroy Meade Hall and kill everyone in it. Only Stoick escaped alive.

Stoick’s flashback has a possible subtext. If the great hall destroyed by Drago’s dragons was indeed the Meade Hall in Berk, Chief Stoick the Vast failed to protect his guests from attack. And as a man who takes very seriously his civic responsibilities, he might have been emotionally scarred by that experience, resulting in his uncompromising conclusion that “Men who kill without reason cannot be reasoned with.” As he speaks this line we see him, in his prominent horned helmet, facing off with Hiccup, who does not wear a helmet and whose fearsome shoulder insignia is counterpointed by his pacifist attitude. Visible behind Stoick is Gobber. He
too wears a horned helmet and has a battle club attached to the end of his artificial arm, reminding us of the dragon war that Hiccup ended. The war Gobber and Stoick once thought intractable, which is how they view the present situation with Drago.

Despite his father’s objections, Hiccup insists on pursuing his peace initiative. He “saddles up” as ordered, but to seek out and negotiate with Drago, not to return to Berk with his father and prepare for war. Remember Astrid scolding Hiccup in the training arena long ago. “Our parent’s war is about to becomes ours.” Once again, Hiccup rejects that idea. Eret, watching the father/son debate while trapped beneath Grumpy, is visibly surprised and puzzled by Hiccup’s determination to change Drago’s violent ways. Though he is not yet Hiccup’s ally, he is beginning to see the light. This scene will play a key role in his eventual change of allegiance.

“This is what I’m good at. And if I can change your mind, I can change his too” Hiccup tells his father before leaving with Toothless. Astrid nods in agreement and mounts Stormfly to follow him, as she did back in the dragon stables on Berk. Stoick sternly orders her to lead the other Vikings back to Berk. This time she reluctantly submits to the Chief’s will. She is torn between her love for and belief in Hiccup and her fidelity to traditional Viking authority. By humorous contrast, Ruffnut pursues her own rebellious impulse, admiring the biceps of her enemy, Eret, until she too is brought back into line by the Chief’s orders. Both young women experience an internal struggle between love and duty. Astrid’s love is rooted in her belief in Hiccup’s wisdom, courage and goodness. Ruffnut’s sudden infatuation with Eret is comparatively shallow. But at least it’s more mature than her attempt to bury Snotlout alive not so long ago.

Hiccup soars above the clouds on his way to confront Drago. The only sound up here is the
wind. This spectacular, serene setting is perhaps a reflection of Hiccup’s idealism as well as his inclination to be solitary. But he’s feeling the strain of going it alone, once more, against his father’s wishes. The dedicated peacemaker angrily pumps his fists in the air and lets out a yell of frustration. Then he leans back in his saddle and gazes at the sky above, contemplating matters while displaying total trust in Toothless, who seems concerned about his friend’s odd behavior. Hiccup reassures him, “Don’t worry, buddy. I’m not going to let anything happen to you. I promise.” Keeping that promise will prove far more difficult than he imagines. Stoick, though mistaken about dragons in the first movie, is right about Drago in this one. In a sense, Stoick becomes one of the hero’s guides in Dragon 2, which he definitely was not in Dragon.

Hiccup remains on his back, looking up at the sky, oblivious to everything else. It’s Toothless who first notices something approaching them from below and behind. Hiccup’s nobility of spirit, represented by his upward gaze, partially blinds him to immediate dangers. The tip of a moving object pokes through the clouds and overtakes our heroes, like the fin of a shark closing on an unsuspecting swimmer. Growling, Toothless casts a wary eye in its direction. Hiccup finally becomes aware of the intruder when its shadow catches his eye too. Whatever it is, it wears pointy headgear and carries what appears to be a weapon. At first Hiccup assumes it’s his father, pursuing him in order to change his mind about confronting Drago. The rebellious son is not pleased.

But it isn’t Stoick who emerges so silently and stealthily from the clouds below. Instead, it looks like a strange cross between a dragon and a human, with a kind of death’s head face. Is it the infamous Drago, towards whom Hiccup was flying? As mysteriously as it emerged from the clouds, the figure disappears back into them. Alert now, Hiccup tells Toothless to make no
sudden movements. He assumes their visitor is Drago, and doesn’t want to alarm him before they can begin negotiations. But the stranger, operating on his own misperceptions, does not reciprocate Hiccup’s non-belligerence. Slicing up through the clouds and directly across Hiccup’s flight path is a sharp-spined dragon much bigger than Toothless. Its rider stands imperiously on the dragon’s back. They circle the smaller pair effortlessly.

The dragons and their riders face off, the wings of the newcomer dwarfing those of Toothless. But the seemingly overmatched Night Fury is not intimidated. Unfortunately for Hiccup and Toothless, the intruders are merely a diversion, distracting the smaller pair so a third dragon can ambush them from behind, snatching Hiccup from his saddle and sending the now flightless Toothless plummeting into the ice-covered ocean far below. Hiccup and Toothless operate best as a team, each compensating for the other’s physical deficiencies. Divided from one another, they are much more vulnerable.

Toothless, his empty saddle prominently visible, struggles to hold his head above water, clutching at an ice flow, watching in anguish as Hiccup, looking like Dorothy being kidnapped by flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), is carried away amidst a flock of alien dragons. He doesn’t see the sharp spines of a menacing creature silently approaching him, once again from behind and below. With minimal effort the larger animal pulls Toothless under the water, leaving behind nothing but Hiccup’s flight helmet, which bobs to the surface. A brief, pathetic whine of protest from Toothless, and it’s all over.

The rapid, effortless conquest of Hiccup and Toothless, accompanied by a somber choral lament on the soundtrack, is a shocking reminder of their vulnerability, despite their fierce loyalty to one another. Leaving only calming waters in its wake, this brief, violent episode
seems to confirm the validity of Stoick’s concern for the safety of his son. Has it all been just a hopelessly naïve quest, crushed in a moment by intransigent, overpowering evil? As things turn out, no it isn't. But the last few images of this scene, like the overhead shot of Rapunzel cradling Eugene’s lifeless body near the end of *Tangled*, vividly reminds us of the ever-present possibility of failure and tragedy. Our heroes’ ultimate triumph and happiness are dependent on the storyteller’s willingness to let their journeys continue. The swiftness of their defeat in this scene is a shocking reversal our first impression of Hiccup and Toothless in *Dragon 2*, skimming the ocean and soaring through the sky with seemingly boundless confidence and optimism.

Carried helplessly to his captor’s lair, Hiccup pleads not on his own behalf but for the sake of Toothless, who cannot fly without him unless his tail wing has been locked in place. He’s counting on the stranger’s compassion to save Toothless. But we see no indication of it.

The kidnapper’s lair is a dark cave beneath a mammoth, spiky ice formation like the one that shattered Eret’s fort. It’s our first clue that the person Hiccup faces is not Drago, but the dragon-riding enemy of Drago about whom Eret complained so bitterly. Deposited on the ground, Hiccup finds himself surrounded by suspicious, hostile dragons, many of unfamiliar species. Still primarily concerned about Toothless, he immediately tries to pacify the strange beasts, employing his flaming sword not to injure but to mesmerize and calm them.

Cloudjumper, the kidnapper’s huge dragon, growls. The distrustful kidnapper keenly observes Hiccup’s unusual behavior from a safe distance, disrupting the young man’s attempt to pacify the other dragons, just as Stoick once spoiled Hiccup’s attempt to make friends with the Nightmare he was supposed to kill in the training arena. So Hiccup switches to a more aggressive Plan B, using his flaming sword to hold the dragons at bay. Still, it’s just a warning, not an attack.
Successful, he reverts to Plan A, approaching one of the dragons with his hand extended in peace. But that gesture too is interrupted by the masked kidnapper, who probably assumes Hiccup is one of the dragon hunters, while Hiccup assumes the kidnapper is Drago.

The stranger, intrigued by the captive’s way with dragons but still wary of the captive’s motives, circles Hiccup. He summons another dragon, who approaches Hiccup from overhead, drops the still-living Toothless at Hiccup’s feet, then flies away. The two old friends happily reunite. The masked stranger cocks his head in puzzlement at the display of mutual affection between human and dragon. If his captive is a member of Eret’s or Drago’s tribe, why would an enslaved dragon treat him like a friend? Did the kidnapper bring them together so the dragon could take revenge on its slave-master?

At a signal from the kidnapper, all the dragons surrounding our duo open their mouths and light up with fire. Are they preparing to incinerate Hiccup and Toothless? Remember Hook Hand’s menacing approach to Rapunzel at the Snuggly Duckling. Toothless reacts with a deep growl, lowering his head and wrapping his tail protectively around Hiccup. Such a display of loyalty to its master by a presumed slave is yet another surprise for the masked figure. But the massed dragon fire is meant only as illumination in the dark cave, to satisfy the mysterious kidnapper’s curiosity about two equally mysterious strangers. He approaches Toothless with submissive gestures, dropping his shield and weapon, just as Hiccup did in Dragon while trying to make peace with the Nightmare in the training arena. Toothless responds by rolling over on his back and contentedly purring, permitting the stranger to pet him with gloveless hands. Now it’s Hiccup’s turn to be surprised.

Without pausing, the kidnapper’s hands stretch out to touch Hiccup, who is less receptive
than was Toothless and backs away. After we learn the identity of the masked stranger, Hiccup’s reluctance to accept a quick and easy acquaintance becomes even more understandable. For now, it’s just his reflexive reaction to the unknown.

Now it’s the kidnapper’s turn to back away, after spotting the scar on Hiccup’s whiskered chin. “Hiccup?” the now obviously female kidnapper calls out hesitantly, from a safe distance, and in the same Scottish accent as Stoick and all other adult Vikings from Berk. Hiccup stammers an awkward reply. She’s obviously not Drago. Removing her mask and giving herself a human face, a long-lost mother confronts her long-lost son. Her self-styled flight suit, like Hiccup’s, is patterned after a dragon, but even more so. Hiccup doesn’t remember her. This is a variation on the tentative third encounter between Hiccup and Toothless in the first movie, when the teenager tried to bribe the wary Night Fury with a fish in order to win his trust. Hiccup’s mother tries to do the same to her son with a different kind of bribe.

To build the drama of this surprising mother/son encounter, we divert to Stoick and Gobber, flying their dragons over a vast arctic land and seascape as they search for Hiccup and Toothless. Both are long accustomed to dealing with Nature at its most imposing. Ignoring their stark surroundings, they congenially bicker about family matters back home. Stoick describes his dead wife, Valka, as “bullheaded,” like their son. Neither could “stay put” he complains. Gobber, as usual, defends Hiccup by reminding Stoick how stubborn he was at Hiccup’s age, and still is.

But if Gobber is wise in some things, he is mistaken about others. He reassures a worried Stoick that no harm can come to Hiccup as long as he’s protected by a Night Fury. In other words, he still buys the old Viking myth about Night Furies being invincible—a myth Hiccup dispelled when he shot down Toothless. A myth contradicted again when Stoick spots a
hole in the ice below, caused by Toothless crash landing. Investigating, Stoick finds Hiccup's helmet floating on the water. Gobber is no longer so confident about the young man's safety. Stoick holds the helmet in front of Skull Crusher's nose, giving the dragon a scent to follow.

Trailing after his mother through a labyrinth of narrow tunnels, Hiccup impatiently questions her about her twenty year absence. She keeps ahead of him, avoiding his questions. Trailing behind Hiccup, Toothless helps his friend navigate the trickier passages of this unfamiliar place, looking after him even when the young man is distracted. His loyalty is so constant that we and Hiccup take it for granted. Which is why it will be so shocking when the dragon betrays his best friend later in the movie.

Valka has a plan. By showing Hiccup her world, she hopes to bridge the emotional gap between them evidenced by his many questions about why she deserted him, never returned home and never tried to contact him. Emerging from the dark tunnel, Hiccup finds himself, as Valka intended, dazzled by her bright, green, breathtaking dragon sanctuary, where a multitude of adults fly freely while infants play on the ground, all of them safe and secure. Waterfalls cascade down steep cliffs covered with tropical foliage. To a native of regions more often than not covered by snow and ice, it's a vision of paradise. In terms of human/dragon relations, it's a spectacularly inflated version of the cove in which Hiccup and Toothless became friends. But there is one crucial difference. Hiccup eventually left his cove and merged that magical realm with Berk, bestowing the benefits of his new friendship with dragons on everyone in his home village, just as Rapunzel brought reformed criminals with her to reside peacefully in her home village. Valka's dragon sanctuary is more like a fortress against the outside world.

Recovering from their initial reaction to the sanctuary, Hiccup and Toothless gaze up at Valka
and Cloudjumper, perched high above them, as was Hiccup when he observed Toothless during his first visit to the cove in Dragon. Both characters, Valka now and Hiccup then, are nervous, uncertain of the reception they'll receive. Think too of Rapunzel’s first conversation with Flynn Rider, conducted while she conceals herself high up in the tower rafters. Hiccup surmises that his mother spent the last twenty years rescuing dragons from the likes of Eret and Drago. Valka tentatively nods her head, hoping Hiccup’s approval of her work will compensate for her negligence as his mother.

“You’re not upset?” Valka inquires, getting to the point at last. “What? No. I don’t know.” Hiccup’s reply betrays mixed feelings. It’s a lot to process all at once. “It’s not every day you find out your mother’s some kind of crazy, feral, vigilante dragon lady.” That sounds like a compliment and an insult. For a moment Hiccup the revolutionary sounds quite traditional, because emotions push him in that direction. “Dragon lady” would be complimentary if he hadn’t added “crazy,” “feral” and “vigilante.”

Echoing relations between mother and son, Toothless behaves standoffishly with one of Valka’s dragon who tries to make friends with him. Whether getting acquainted or re-acquainted, the process can be difficult. But just as being away from her parents for almost the same length of time as Hiccup was apart from Valka helped shape Rapunzel into the impressive woman she became in Tangled, Hiccup became Hiccup partly because he grew up without a mother and largely estranged from his father. In fairy tale terms that separation may represent the normal period of estrangement when a maturing child rebels against what he then regards as his or her overbearing parents.

Descending to the ground, Valka tries to close the emotional gap with son but she remains
unsure of herself. She offers the unusual defense of her actions that at least she’s not
“boring.” Uncertain of her moral position, she attempts to distract her son with humor. “No, I
suppose there is that,” he reluctantly concedes while allowing one of his mother’s dragons (the
same dragon whose overtures Toothless rejected) to nuzzle him. If Rapunzel had kept Flynn at a
distance, she would never have completed her journey to adulthood. If Hiccup had kept his
distance from Toothless, he too would not have discovered the best in himself. Valka and Hiccup
must navigate the same gap, which won’t be easy.

“D-Do you like it?” Valka stammers while gesturing to her world. So she was trying to make
peace with Hiccup by impressing him with her achievements instead of admitting her failures
and asking his forgiveness for abandoning him as a child. And he is impressed. Meanwhile, on
the dragon front, Toothless finds himself surrounded by curious, alien dragons. Dog-like, one
sniffs under his wing. Startled by such overly-familiar behavior (after all, he’s not dealing with
Stromfly), Toothless protests. The spurned dragons flee, as frightened of the newcomer as he is
of them.

Careful to solicit Hiccup’s permission first, Valka approaches Toothless the correct way and
quickly makes friends. Catlike now, he circles and rubs against her. Counting protrusions on his
chin, she concludes that Toothless is the same age as Hiccup, making the connection between
their respective journeys from childhood to maturity even stronger. “No wonder you get along so
well” she adds, implicitly acknowledging a generation gap that always exists. But Hiccup’s
emotional isolation in the first Dragon movie was more profound than she realizes. Alienated
from his peers as well as his parents, Hiccup created a friend in Toothless. In a broad sense, the
dragon is his fantasy wish-fulfillment, supplying Hiccup with a best friend and a means of
challenging not only his mighty father but his Viking heritage as well. Not without, of course, many trials and tribulations that forced the boy to make difficult, courageous choices and think his way past many obstacles. But in the end, by fairy tale magic, he earned the respect of his father, the girl he loves, his fellow teenagers and all of Berk.

Valka’s discovery that Toothless has retractable teeth repeats Hiccup’s earlier discovery of the same fact. Knowledgeable about dragons as she is, she doesn’t know everything, including a few things Hiccup does. Her quick and easy friendship with Toothless is backed by twenty years of experience with dragons. And she began that experience as an adult. Hiccup had to navigate the same territory as a teenager, with no help and plenty of opposition from adults and his fellow teens. Thus the current skills of mother and son cannot be fairly compared. Nevertheless, Hiccup is sincerely impressed with his mother’s expertise.

Now it’s Hiccup’s turn to be evasive. He tells her he met Toothless in the woods, where the dragon had been shot down and wounded. Valka reacts angrily to such an act of cruelty. She shows Hiccup the injuries inflicted on several of her sanctuary dragons, then inquires if Drago or his trappers were responsible for the injury to Toothless. Embarrassed, Hiccup admits he was the culprit. But he tries to soften the news by joking that Toothless got even by rescuing only part of him from the Red Death. “Peg-leg,” he announces, holding up his artificial limb. Obviously holding no grudge, Toothless hoists his best friend into the saddle. Hiccup reciprocates with a welcome chin rub. Of course, we know that no part of Hiccup would have survived the inferno of the Red Death’s destruction if Toothless hadn’t charged to the rescue. But because Hiccup is ashamed of wounding his best friend before they became friends, especially when admitting as much to so fervent a dragon champion as Valka, he skews the facts about Toothless’s injury in
Caressing the dragon’s head, Valka is not surprised to learn that Stoick objected to Hiccup’s friendship with Toothless. She is surprised to hear that Stoick subsequently changed his mind. Her opinion of Berk and its residents took shape decades ago and has hardened ever since. She refuses to believe the village is now full of dragon/Viking friendships. “People are not capable of change, Hiccup. Some of us were just born different” she insists with unwitting snobbery, sounding as inflexible as Stoick when he proclaimed dragons unalterably evil, and more recently when he told Hiccup that Drago “cannot be reasoned with.” Despite their many similarities, Hiccup and Valka do not see the world in quite the same way. He remains the idealistic revolutionary, naïve perhaps, but also more capable of forging change for the better. Fittingly, Valka’s recollection of human intractability is accompanied by a visual flashback to a story from her past, as was Stoick’s when he described Drago in equally unflattering terms.

During a mass dragon attack on Berk, Valka tried to stop fellow Vikings from killing the attackers, claiming “You’ll only make it worse.” Then she spotted a dragon, who would later become her beloved Cloudjumper, breaking into her home and approaching baby Hiccup in his cradle. Succumbing to a parent’s protective instinct, and contradicting her earlier behavior, she grabs a sword to defend her son. Cloudjumper is startled by her sudden, aggressive appearance. His sharp talon, originally extended in friendship to a smiling, receptive Hiccup, accidentally slashes the infant’s chin as the dragon wheels around to face Valka’s threat. Fear generates violence, which in turn generates more fear. Hiccup cries out in pain. It’s neither an intentional nor serious wound, but it leaves a scar we noticed the first time we saw the boy, as a teenager, in How to Train Your Dragon. Not until Valka’s flashback are we able to identify that scar as a
symbol reflecting the potential for both friendship and distrust in Viking/dragon relations, just as Hiccup’s peg leg is a product of both dragon violence (the Red Death) and dragon compassion (Toothless). Back inside her flashback, Valka is surprised to discover in Cloudjumper “a gentle, intelligent creature whose soul reflected my own.” Another link is forged between mythical dragons and the human beings who invent them, for better or worse. Because of Valka’s non-belligerent reaction, Cloudjumper responds in kind. Both find their gentle hearts.

When Stoick intrudes with his battle axe, Cloudjumper’s behavior predictably changes to match the Chief’s. The dragon attacks with fire. Valka tries to stop him from incinerating her husband. For that action she is kidnapped by the beast as Stoick, holding Hiccup in his arms, watches helplessly from the wreckage of their home.

“You and your father nearly died that night, all because I wouldn’t kill a dragon.” Hiccup had a similar moment of self-doubt, as he stood on a high cliff watching his father’s Viking armada depart, with captive Toothless, in quest of the dragon’s nest, intending to destroy it. On that occasion Hiccup too wondered if his refusal, or inability, to kill Toothless when he had the chance hadn’t led to disaster for both Vikings and dragons. Fortunately, Astrid was on hand to boost his confidence. Valka’s conviction about not harming dragons battles with her sense of guilt about endangering her family. And that internal conflict has remained unresolved and festering for twenty years. Both mother and son occasionally overcompensate for their insecurities: Hiccup’s reckless gliding experiments are partly a cover-up for his deep reservations about becoming Chief. Valka’s aristocratic sense of moral superiority (“Some of us were born different.”) soothes her abiding guilt about endangering and abandoning her son and husband. She stayed away from Berk because she felt ashamed, not because she was trying to
protect her family, as she claims. But she cannot yet face the truth about her actions.

"It runs in the family" Hiccup commiserates, knowing that he too put Viking lives, including Stoick's, at risk back in the training arena when he refused to slay a Nightmare. What Hiccup does not know is that he will cost Stoick his life, however unintentionally, by persisting with his noble quest to make peace with Drago. Acting on the highest ideals carries serious, unforeseeable risks. That's the next onslaught of guilt with which he will have to deal.

Valka's claim that she avoided Berk in order to protect her family is the long-delayed answer to the urgent question Hiccup tried to ask her back in the tunnel. Does she show Hiccup the next marvel in her dragon sanctuary in order to avoid any follow-up discussion of her past mistake? Or have mother and son reconciled sufficiently for her to simply want to share more of her world with him? I'm guessing the former.

The great Bewilderbeast, the Alpha Male of its species, is a gigantic dragon with huge tusks, an armored back and a spiky crown resembling the ice formations it is capable of spewing from its mouth. It sits unmoving and unmoved, imperious, at the center of the sanctuary it created. One of the few of its species still in existence, Valka informs her son. Which makes it rare, though perhaps not quite so rare as Toothless, the only known Night Fury, and Hiccup, who befriended a dragon at a much earlier age than did his mother.

Other dragons display submission to the King of their kind. The same icy breath that shattered Eret's pirate fort has a more positive aspect, constructing a roof over Valka's dragon sanctuary. The place looks a little like a greenhouse—an isolated, artificial environment that must avoid exposure to the outside world in order for its residents to survive. It's a kinder, gentler version of Mother's Gothel's tower, but nevertheless still a kind of prison. Hiccup remarks on the
destructiveness of the Bewilderbeast's power, which he saw when he first encountered Eret. Valka reinterprets that destruction as protection and describes the Alpha Male in godlike terms. “We all live under his care, and his command. Except for the baby dragons, who listen to no one,” she adds with amusement. The Alpha is less amused when some of those disrespectful infants fly too close to his face. I’m reminded of a male lion tolerating but not thrilled by the attention of his offspring. Valka, on the other hand, reminds me of people who rebel against the prevailing social beliefs and customs on which they were raised, only to embrace uncritically a new, foreign set of beliefs and customs. She’s exchanged one sanctuary (Berk, as she knew it) for another (the Bewilderbeast’s fortress kingdom).

The Alpha Male rises up as though emerging from slumber, dwarfing Valka and Hiccup. Valka bows before the giant. Hiccup does not, staring straight at the Alpha with wonder and curiosity, but not submission. The giant sprays him with a small blast of icy breath, frosting his hair and eyebrows. A mild warning? Not according to Valka, who claims it’s a gesture of approval. Maybe. But though duly impressed, Hiccup still doesn’t bow down. Nor did he bow to his own father when it came to defending Toothless in the first movie. Valka’s Alpha dragon attacked rather than tried to make peace with Eret and his pirates. His attitude is a reflection of hers, despite the fact that she pretends to worship and obey him. In a sense, Valka enshrines her own outlook through the Alpha Male, placing it beyond questioning. The pirates she and her Bewilderbeast attacked as implacable enemies are the same pirates with whom Hiccup tried to and eventually will make peace.

Size matters in fairy tales. The three adults who stand in the way of Hiccup becoming an independent adult are Stoick, Valka and Drago. All three are associated with gigantic dragons
whom our hero and his much smaller dragon, Toothless, must overcome in some manner or another. Hiccup destroyed the Red Death, who was a reflection of Stoick’s size and intransigent hostility towards outsiders. Hiccup doesn’t bow down before Valka’s Bewilderbeast. And in the end, he and Toothless will drive away Drago’s Alpha Male.

_Tangled_ contained no such dragons. Nevertheless, size played a role in the struggles of Rapunzel and Eugene against their enemies, who were all older. Mother Gothel, the Stabbington Brothers, Maximus, Hook Hand and Vladimir were also bigger than the hero and heroine. Rapunzel and Eugene didn’t have to kill them all—some were changed for the better and became allies—but certainly had to confront and overcome them before moving on with their heroic journey.

Still showing off her superior knowledge, Valka invites Hiccup to join her and the dragons for a meal. Meanwhile, Toothless seeks comforting shelter under Cloudjumper’s larger wing. He looks cute, like a shy child clinging to a parent’s leg for security. The one-of-a-kind, young adult orphan reverts to childish behavior for a moment, like Rapunzel running into Mother Gothel’s arms after apparently being betrayed by Eugene. The circumstances of the two actions are very different, but the emotional impulse from which they proceed is not. Hiccup, though certainly pleased to be reunited with his mother, does not follow his dragon’s example. Defying Stoick at a tender age has made him more independent than most Vikings and dragons. Unfortunately for Toothless, Cloudjumper does not yet feel particularly paternal. Rudely pulling his wing away from the smaller dragon, he departs.

Valka’s dragon sanctuary, with its icy cap supplied by the Alpha dragon she has made her King, is a womb-like sanctuary for the middle-aged wife and mother who has not yet confronted
and resolved the emotions she tried to leave behind on Berk. The Bewilderbeast is the gigantic scab she’s formed over that unhealed wound. By placing herself under the Bewilderbeast’s command, she cleverly avoids treating or even acknowledging the injury beneath it. The Alpha Male allows her to evade guilt and replace it with a fragile vanity. It’s her abiding sense of shame about deserting Hiccup and Stoick that fuels that vanity, though she doesn’t realize it. By sharing her fantasy world (the kind of unhealthy fantasy against which Bettelheim warned) with Hiccup, she coaxes him to give up a bigger, more complicated world fraught with many emotional risks, but also a world that contains Astrid, Stoick, friends and many possibilities for exploration and growth. Valka’s ice-covered sanctuary is a gilt-edged trap equivalent to Mother Gothel’s decidedly less gilt-edged tower, though Valka’s motives are not as consciously selfish as those of Rapunzel’s phony mother.

Resting on an iceberg in mid-ocean, Astrid and her fellow riders, along with their dragons, wait for Stoick and Gobber to return with Hiccup. She was supposed to lead everyone back to Berk, but she’s worried about her boyfriend. Ruffnut isn’t content with the present situation either. She misses Eret, the man of her dreams, to the disappointment of her immediate suitors, Snotlout and Fishlegs. Choosing between loyalty to Hiccup and obedience to Stoick, Astrid defies the Chief’s command and flies off on Stormfly to search for her boyfriend. In the absence of her biological father, who is neither seen nor heard from in either film, Stoick serves as a surrogate parent to Astrid. Her rebellion against the Chief in this scene is an echo of Hiccup’s rebellion in the first film. Both young characters have to make a break from their past life of dependency and idolatry. An idolatry that Valka, for all her years of experience, wisdom and courage, still practices, in her own way, by worshiping the Bewilderbeast. Astrid’s peers reluctantly follow
her lead, departing the iceberg to search for Hiccup. She is, for now, their Alpha Female.

After witnessing Hiccup master Eret and his band of pirates, Astrid tries the same, and succeeds. She and Stormfly easily avoid the pirates’ nets as she kidnaps Eret to help her locate Drago, with whom she hopes to find Hiccup. Ruffnut wants Eret for other reasons, but yields to Astrid’s priorities. Eret arrogantly refuses to cooperate, so Astrid orders Stormfly to dump him in the ocean. On the way down he prudently changes his mind. But the other overconfident character in this brief scene is Astrid, who is much too pleased with her power to manipulate both dragon and pirate, ordering Stormfly to “drop” and then “fetch” her terrified captive. “Works every time,” she smugly congratulates herself. Like Hiccup’s friendship with Toothless, Astrid’s emotional bond with Stormfly seems unbreakable. She takes it for granted. She and Hiccup are being set up for a major fall from grace, anticipated in a milder way by some of the television episodes released between the two feature films.

Valka and Cloudjumper lead Hiccup, Toothless and a huge flock of dragons out to sea to feed. Hovering face-to-face with her son, her dragon dwarfing his, she deliberately dazzles him again with another display of her extensive dragon knowledge. The Bewilderbeast bursts out of the sea like a breeching whale, trapping a vast number of fish in his mouth. Sliding back into the water, he spits out those fish, which rain down like manna from heaven on his subjects. Valka laughs with delight and triumph. Hiccup is awestruck. Toothless, smacking his mouth, pursues the bountiful meal. Think back to Hiccup tempting a starving Toothless into friendship with a single fish, at considerable risk to himself. In this scene the Alpha Male supplies a much larger gift on behalf of Valka, who in a sense is bribing her son to abandon his larger world and embrace hers. A chorus of voices in the background music helps paint a picture of paradise on Earth. But is it?
When Hiccup offered a single fish to a frightened and wary Toothless, he took a calculated risk in the pursuit of friendship, and was in turn rewarded, unappetizing as it was, with half of that same fish, regurgitated. Valka, on the other hand, is not really extending an offer of friendship through her Alpha Male. She’s offering Hiccup an apprenticeship in her world rather than a mutual sharing of both their worlds.

After being dazzled by his mother, Hiccup tries to do the same to her. It’s a competition, not a compromise. On top of an iceberg he spreads out his map and enthusiastically describes his explorations. But she interrupts his narrative by using her staff to draw a much larger, more extensive map in the snow. Viewed from overhead, her geographical expertise surrounds and dwarfs his. Outdone again, Hiccup admits his mother’s superior knowledge of the world.

The map drawing recalls an incident in Dragon where Hiccup drew a picture of Toothless in the dirt. Intrigued, Toothless responded by drawing mysterious swirls around Hiccup. It became a game by which the two characters got better acquainted. Valka’s snow map may be intended as a sympathetic response to her son’s endeavor. But it also overshadows his achievement, making him feel once more like a junior partner, unlike his relationships with Toothless and Astrid but very much like his relationship with Stoick.

Toothless is to Cloudjumper what Hiccup is to Valka. If not strictly child to parent, then certainly junior to senior. Toothless intrudes his game on top of Valka’s. In terms of fairy tale wish-fulfillment, Hiccup’s alter-ego trumps his mother, scoring a victory for the young Viking. But Toothless is also trying to impress Cloudjumper, using a giant icicle to create the same kind of drawing around the larger, older dragon that he once drew around Hiccup. It’s his way of trying to make friends with his giant new acquaintance. Cloudjumper, rotating his head like an
enormous owl as he watches the proceedings, appears curious, if not yet receptive.

Valka, again taking the offensive in her unacknowledged contest of wills with Hiccup, takes him to an area of extreme updraft near a cliff. They and their dragons experience effortless flight, hovering in mid-air. Toothless spreads his legs out to maintain his balance while enjoying the free ride. Rapturously rhythmical vocal music accompanies and accentuates Valka’s smooth mastery of wing-walking from dragon to dragon. She even crosses over Toothless’ outspread wings before returning to Cloudjumper. “When I’m up here, I don’t even feel the cold. I just feel …” “Free,” Hiccup completes her thought. It’s a moment of near-perfect empathy between parent and child. And for that brief moment, they seem equals. Then Valka adds, like a mother teaching a lesson to a needy child, “This is what it is like to be a dragon, Hiccup.” But Hiccup, out of necessity, grew up a long time ago. His early, dangerous flights with Toothless taught him the lesson his mother presumes to teach him now. And so, almost in retaliation, he responds by teaching her a lesson, showing off his revolutionary technological skills.

With a hint of competitive pride in his voice, Hiccup announces “It’s all well and good to call yourself a dragon. But can you fly?” He locks Toothless’ tail wing in place and launches himself into the air. It’s Valka’s turn to be astonished as her grown-up son deploys his manufactured wings to flies solo. Viewed from below, Hiccup zooms past their dragons. A disbelieving Cloudjumper glances at Toothless, who returns that glance with a smug expression of superiority, echoing Hiccup’s triumph over Valka. If he couldn’t impress the older dragon by his own efforts, he does so now through the efforts of his best friend. Eret once tried to intimidate Hiccup by threatening him with Drago’s power. But that was a pathetic and cowardly act, because Drago was not Eret’s friend. Hiccup and Toothless are practically the same character.
After a moment of triumph achieved vicariously through Hiccup, Toothless suddenly opens his eyes wide with alarm, remembering the essential role he has to play in Hiccup’s little production. Gliding is not the same as sustained flight. The dragon zooms down to shadow the confident but not yet completely independent flying human. And just in time, as Hiccup approaches a mountain peak. Wrapping Hiccup in his arms and wings, Toothless safely navigates through a small gap in that peak and crash lands in the soft snow beyond, repeating their crash landing from earlier in the film.

Hiccup emerges from the snow bank with his hands thrust victoriously in the air, convinced that he has amazed his mother. “We just about had it that time!” he jokes. Less amused, as was also the case after their previous crash landing, Toothless scolds Hiccup by knocking him off his feet with a sweep of his dragon tail. Landing next to her son, Valka examines and admires the wings built into her son’s flight suit. She places her hand fondly on his cheek, checking to make sure he’s unharmed. Hiccup closes his eyes and leans into that hand, like a child drawing comfort from a mother’s touch. He may be an adult, but he’s also been deprived of Valka’s loving care for twenty years. It’s the first intimate acknowledgement of the original parent/child bond between them. Until now they’ve danced around that issue, afraid to reconnect for fear of disappointment or rejection. Recall Rapunzel and Eugene enjoying the loving, protective embrace of her parents near the end of Tangled. Like Hiccup, they too were deprived of parental affection for many years. But after their brief family huddle, Rapunzel and Eugene quickly moved on to a life of adult independence and mutual love.

Valka finally apologizes, in direct terms, for deserting Hiccup all those years ago. He silently forgives her. She promises to share with him all the knowledge about dragons she gathered
during those years. By way of demonstration, she presses a sensitive spot on Toothless’ neck, causing a series of small fins to emerge along his spine, which will give him greater maneuverability in flight. Hiccup is impressed, again. Toothless is thrilled, rushing to Hiccup to share his excitement, then plunging into and “flying” through the snow around Cloudjumper, eager to impress the older dragon with his new abilities, as a child would try to impress a parent. Cloudjumper, still unreceptive to playing the mother Toothless eagerly seeks, merely tilts his head and dumps a pile of snow onto the smaller dragon.

Valka offers her son what seems like a full partnership. Together they will “unlock every mystery, find every last species together, as mother and son.” But “as mother and son” still smacks of a mentor/apprentice arrangement, which doesn’t feel quite right. Long separated from Hiccup, Valka makes no allowance for other relationships in his life. What about Astrid, who knows him better than does Valka? Time did not stand still for Hiccup during Valka’s absence, even though she wants to believe it did, so she can resume their relationship where it left off and assuage her guilt over not being there for him when he was a child.

Valka tempting Hiccup to return with her to their parent/child past is roughly analogous to Mother Gothel holding out her sheltering arms to Rapunzel after the teenager was apparently betrayed by Eugene. Valka’s intentions are better than those of Gothel, who staged Eugene’s alleged betrayal and wants Rapunzel to return home because she is dependent on the girl’s magical hair. But the actions of both mothers are rooted in weakness: maternal guilt for Valka and a fear of growing old and dying for Gothel.

Valka tries to answer the question Hiccup posed to himself earlier, in conversation with Astrid. “This is who you are, son.” She further defines their mission: “We will change the world for all
dragons. We will make it a better, safer place.” Note that she does not refer to making the world a better place for dragons and humans. Like Hiccup back in the cove with Toothless, Valka broke with Viking tradition and embraced the world of dragons. But unlike Hiccup, she makes no effort to join those two worlds (a necessary step in the hero’s journey, according to Joseph Campbell), rendering both the better for it. Misinterpreting his mother’s offer, Hiccup closes his eyes contentedly in acknowledgement of their new understanding. Yet his acceptance would require him to give up his life and peacemaking efforts outside Valka’s realm. He would never become Chief of his own village.

Neither Dragon nor Dragon 2 is a simple tale of a son’s triumph over his father’s rejection and world view. In fleeing from Berk, Valka fully embraced the world of dragons. It became her ivory tower. Hiccup intended to do the same when he made plans to flee Berk forever, forsaking Viking society in favor of companionship with Toothless, in the first movie. He showed signs of doing the same at the beginning of this movie, fleeing the looming burden of chiefdom while pursuing his dream of unfettered exploration and adventure with Toothless. It was an understandable yet flawed impulse to separate rather than reconcile his two worlds.

The illusion of harmony between mother and son breaks when Hiccup invites Valka to join him on his mission to negotiate peace with Drago. If she wants to share her world and mission with him, surely she will accept his similar offer. To his disappointment, she echoes Stoick’s intransigent disapproval. “There’s no talking with Drago. We must protect our own.” It’s the same tribal imperative that once kept Vikings from making peace with dragons. Hiccup is frustrated. Like a parent setting a curfew for a child, Valka tells him they should return to the sanctuary. Theirs is not an equal partnership. The protective yet domineering attitudes of Valka
and Stoick are too ingrained to yield easily to their son’s need for independence. But since Toothless is eager to try out his new dorsal fins, which he received as a maternal gift from Valka, Hiccup yields to his mother’s wishes, for the time being. It’s as if Toothless embodied Hiccup’s secret yearning to return to a protected childhood and evade the challenges of maturity.

Eret is unceremoniously dropped into a mountaintop snow bank as Astrid and her companions approach Drago’s camp. Stormfly cuddles the protesting pirate with her limbs and wings, like a mama bird protecting its young. Astrid investigates what’s on the other side of the mountain, where she spots many soldiers on a sea shore and a fleet of ships gathered around a large circle of bubbles in the water. Fishlegs, the leading dragon authority this side of Hiccup, speculates the bubbles come from a Class Six leviathan. He underestimates by a factor of four.

If Astrid thought of herself as master of her world when she snatched Eret from his ship and effortlessly coerced him into helping her locate Drago, she learns otherwise now, just as Hiccup and Toothless did when they encountered the much more experienced Valka and Cloudjumper. Stormfly is the first to sense danger, but too late. The Vikings and their dragons are ambushed and quickly neutralized by Drago’s warriors, cleverly camouflaged in polar bear skins. The contest is over in moments, as was Hiccup’s with Valka.

Perched on the bow of his massive ship, looking bigger than even Stoick the Vast, Drago Bludvist communes silently with whatever generates the bubbles coming out of the sea. He’s a barbarous-looking man with a badly scarred face and an attitude to match, hardened by some past experience. Compare his many scars with Hiccup’s single chin scar. Their faces are a measure of much deeper emotional scars. Hiccup overcame his. Drago did not. He’s draped in a cape of dragon skins. Armored dragons lower their heads in submission when he passes by. He
saunters forward with serene confidence. Hook Fang struggles against his shackles, frightening his captors. But he does not frighten Drago, who advances steadily towards him. Nor does a blast of the Nightmare’s fire intimidate the dragon master. Not even Stoick could withstand such a direct attack. The villain’s knowledge of dragons rivals, or surpasses, Valka’s and Hiccup’s.

Drago’s approach to Hook Fang is very different from Hiccup’s approach to Toothless in the first film. The teenager respectfully averted his eyes and slowly, carefully extended his hand in friendship, allowing Toothless to bridge the last few inches and make contact. Drago advances on the roaring Hook Fang with a roar of his own. Instead of a tentative, gentle hand, he places his big boot on the lowered snout of the now submissive dragon. It’s a gesture of domination, not friendship. If Valka, in her emotional weakness, chose to deify dragons, Drago, in his, subjugates and humiliates them.

Recognizing his position as weak, Eret tries to worm his way back into the good graces of his surrogate father’s good graces, pretending to have captured both the dragons and their riders for Drago’s benefit. It’s a humiliating exhibition. Not even Ruffnut can respect him now. Nor does Drago, who grabs Eret by the throat and demands to know how many other dragon riders are out there, as potential opposition.

Outmaneuvered but not yet beaten, Astrid bravely tries to turn the tables on Drago and do a little intimidating herself. Correctly surmising from Drago’s question to Eret that Hiccup and Toothless are not his prisoners, she lies to her captor. “Hundreds. A whole island full” of dragon riders threaten Drago’s existence. Eret tries again, without success, to ingratiate himself by falsely claiming his men are at this very moment hunting down those rival riders. Ignoring the hapless pirate, as does Drago, Astrid insists she and her friends will soon be located by tracking
dragons and rescued by Hiccup, “son of Stoick the Vast, heir to the throne of Berk, and only the greatest dragon master this world has ever seen.” If Eret and Astrid both play a game of bluff with Drago, she is better at it. Or maybe she really believes Drago is no challenge for her boyfriend. And she may not be alone in that belief. When Drago claims that he alone controls all dragons, the other young Vikings laugh with derision at him. Are they cleverly backing Astrid’s bluff? Or foolishly aping her overconfidence? None of them know anything about Drago’s lurking Alpha Male and the enormous threat it poses to their world.

Astrid demands Drago release her and the other riders. Not as worried as they should be, Fishlegs and Snotlout slip back into their old distraction of competing for Ruffnut’s affections. Perhaps in the aftermath of their spectacular victory over the Red Death, whom not even their parents could defeat, these young warriors underestimate the challenge of Drago.

Drago accepts Astrid’s claim that hundreds of dragon riders threaten his domain. But instead of yielding to her demands, he orders immediate preparations for an attack on the dragon sanctuary, about which Astrid knows nothing, to be followed by an assault on Berk. Instead of bluffing her way out of captivity, Astrid unwittingly endangers her home village. And her miscalculation foreshadows a much bigger one by Hiccup.

Drago orders his soldiers to kill Eret. To everyone’s surprise, Stormfly shields the pirate from harm, blocking a throng of hurled battleaxes and returning a volley of thorns. By playing fetch with the unwitting pirate on board his ship, then saving him from falling to his death in the ocean, the maternal dragon developed an emotional attachment to Eret, however much he doesn’t yet deserve it. Drago orders the dragon tranquilized. It’s all over quickly. Nevertheless, Eret, crawling out from beneath his unconscious rescuer, is stunned by what she did for him. He
could not have imagined that a creature like those he routinely traps and condemns to captivity would treat him so kindly. Stormfly continues the lesson Hiccup started to teach Eret aboard the pirate ship, before he was interrupted by Stoick’s ill-timed rescue mission.

Back at Valka’s sanctuary, Hiccup observes the dragon activity all around him. Is he reconciled to following the path his mother laid out for him? Toothless, meanwhile, is annoyed by the attention of several unruly baby dragons. He frightens away all but one with a roar. The exception remains attached to the Night Fury’s tail by his mouth, as though Toothless were a giant teething ring. Kids just don’t respect their elders. But at least Toothless gets to play the adult, not the child, in this scene. And Hiccup behaves likewise.

“Let’s go,” orders Hiccup, refusing to accept his mother’s opposition to peace negotiations with Drago. This is another big step for Hiccup—another declaration of independence from parental authority. But escape won’t be easy. A big hand reaches into the camera frame and covers Hiccup’s mouth, silencing him. It’s Stoick, come to take Hiccup back to Berk, whether his son likes it or not. Like Mother Gothel trying to do the same to Rapunzel during the forest campfire scene in *Tangled*. And there follows another awkward, failed attempt at communication between father and son as Stoick leads Hiccup back through the tunnel by which Valka brought him into her sanctuary. Hiccup struggles to tell his father about Valka while Stoick stubbornly refuses to listen.

It requires Gobber’s interference to stop Stoick in his tracks, which Hiccup couldn’t do even when he promised Stoick a *pleasant* surprise for a change. Both old friend and young son place a restraining hand on Stoick’s shoulder. Taking out his sword, the Chief perhaps expects to encounter Drago as he exits the tunnel. Instead he finds Valka, whom he thought long dead.
Stoick freezes in his tracks. Hiccup and Gobber stand on either side of him, curious to see the reactions of reunited husband and wife after twenty years of separation.

First the sword drops, then the helmet comes off. Symbols of aggression are discarded, echoing Hiccup's attempt to make peace with a Nightmare in the arena, five years earlier. Stoick is stunned speechless by the sight of Valka, pictured against a backdrop of blue-green ice that renders her, visually, almost a fantasy figure. That same ice reflects her guilt-fed fear of intimacy. She reacts coolly to the sight of her husband. Like Toothless pulling away the first time Hiccup extended his hand in friendship, Valka behaves defensively, trying to justify her twenty year absence. An audience of dragons, Valka's new family, gathers round, joining Hiccup and Gobber as spectators to this extraordinary, tentative reunion between characters divided by more than time and distance. They saw their world very differently the last time they were together.

Not recognizing the significance of Stoick tossing aside his sword and helmet, Valka desperately tries to evade what she assumes will be his accusations of desertion by diverting her own feelings of guilt onto his shoulders. He slowly approaches her without uttering a word. Surely his anger wouldn't cause him to strike her. In the spectator gallery, Gobber remarks to Hiccup, "This is why I never married." As usual, his sarcasm counteracts any excessive sentiment.

Gobber tags on an amendment to his comment about why he never married: "This and one other reason." It's a teaser inserted by the filmmakers. Obviously Gobber harbors a secret. Did Gobber lose the woman he loved? Did he never make the connection that Stoick and Valka, and more recently Hiccup and Astrid, did? Was he in love with Valka, subsequently losing her to Stoick? It's grist for a third movie, perhaps.
Raising her staff defensively in front of her and retreating from Stoick’s advance until she backs into a block of ice, Valka changes her tune from aggressive to apologetic, almost pleading. Her remorse is never far from the surface, whether she’s confronting her son or her husband. “Stop being so stoic, Stoick! Shout! Scream! Say something!” she begs, unable to bear the increasing burden of her own shame. But instead of berating her, Stoick gently touches her face and quietly tells her she’s as beautiful as the day he lost her. The staff slips from her grasp and she surrenders a tear of relief. Stoick softly kisses her. The audience of dragons backs away, as though out of respect for this private moment of reconciliation. Hiccup smiles.

A family reunion still being negotiated is suddenly displaced by an image of Drago’s massive ship being towed in the direction of the dragon sanctuary by something no doubt equally massive under the water. Standing at the bow, Drago commands that submerged power by striking the chains that link it to the vessel. It’s not communication between friends and equals. Back towards the stern of the ship, Eret and the young dragon riders are forced to walk the plank and jump into the ocean, to either drown or freeze. First in line, Eret offers his spot to Astrid in mock chivalry. Assuming he would sacrifice her life to gain a few more moments for himself, she reacts with contempt. But she’s wrong. Hiccup’s interrupted lesson in dragon loyalty and Stormfly’s surprising demonstration of the same made an impression on the pirate. He overcomes his childlike fear of Drago, as Hiccup did his blind fealty to Stoick’s point of view when he spared the life of Toothless. Showing compassion to the Vikings who kidnapped him, he orders Astrid to “duck.”

Eret executes a roundhouse kick, disposing of the two guards restraining Astrid. In the best tradition of swashbuckling movie heroes, he retrieves the weapons of the fallen guards, frees
himself and begins dispatching more enemy soldiers. Observing the action, Ruffnut falls in love all over again. Tuffnut, his confidence restored, reverts to tormenting Snotlout about his hopeless passion for Ruffnut. "You can still jump" he cruelly advises. But the most interesting reaction is Astrid's. When Eret apologizes and promises to liberate the Viking's dragons, she smiles at him in a way that almost matches Ruffnut's grin of infatuation, visible in the same shot. Like Gobber's mysterious comment about never marrying, it's potential material for the next Dragon installment. Will there be a romantic complication for our young heroes? Could Eret play Lancelot to Hiccup's King Arthur in some future Camelot, with Astrid as their Guinevere?

Eret liberates the Vikings. The enormity of Drago's vessel is a handicap in some ways. Drago is so far removed from the site of prisoner revolt that he isn't even aware of it until it's done. Meanwhile, Astrid and Eret make a good team. She locates and rescues Meatlug while he does the same for Stormfly, thanking Astrid's dragon for saving his life. He's learned to trust a dragon and has earned that dragon's trust in return.

Blissfully unaware of approaching danger, Hiccup and his parents enjoy a respite of domesticity back at the sanctuary, preparing a family meal together. Rapunzel and Eugene experienced similar interludes of hopeful tranquility, around their forest campfire and again in a gondola during the floating lantern show. But they were two young, maturing adults exploring their love for each other. Hiccup's respite, on the other hand, is a kind of return to the happy childhood he never had. Making up for lost time, Hiccup eagerly brags to his mother the radical changes (changes he brought about) that have transformed Berk, where even dragon dentistry is now practiced. Weapons once used to kill have given way to saddles and wing slings. Toothless, like a beloved family pet, tries to snitch food from a basket. Stoick praises Hiccup for the
positive influence he’s had on Berk and Hiccup laps it up, as he did the loving touch of Valka’s hand earlier. These are things he was denied while growing up. Even Cloudjumper and Toothless have become friends, the older dragon sharing some of his purloined fish with his junior. Toothless, like Hiccup, is thrilled to be coddled by his (surrogate) parent.

After repeatedly trying to impress Hiccup with her dragon expertise, Valka reluctantly admits her deficiency as a cook. For us it’s part of her unconventional appeal, and perhaps a preview of Astrid and Hiccup’s future, since Astrid proved herself to be a horrible chef in the television episode “Gift of the Night Fury.” Stoick compassionately reminds her he didn’t marry her for her abilities in the kitchen. Gobber, playing the part of wisecracking uncle in this reassembled family, reiterates Stoick’s point with humor, feeding Valka’s unappetizing meatballs to Grumpy, a Gronkle-type dragon accustomed to eating rocks. Contented, the dragon resumes snoozing in the corner, like the old family pooch. For a brief but treasured moment all of these characters get to be the family they haven’t been for twenty years, or in the case of Gobber and Toothless, ever.

Overheated with joy, Hiccup can’t help but project the glorious present onto an idyllic future outside the dragon sanctuary. Once Valka and her dragons join Berk and its dragons, Drago won’t stand a chance. “Everything will be okay!” he exclaims with supreme confidence. Emotionally he’s higher than a soaring Timberjack. And that enthusiasm bubbles over into naïve optimism. Stoick cautions him to “slow down.” Not so much out of worry about the threat of Drago, but because he notices Valka’s difficulty adjusting to the extreme changes in what was her carefully ordered, solitary life. She remains silent during Hiccup’s monolog. “It’s a lot to take in,” Stoick cautions his son.

Distancing herself from both husband and son, Valka walks back to the overhanging slab of
slowly melting ice from where she first greeted Stoick. Ostensibly she does so merely to fill a jug with water. But the metaphor tells us more. Having shielded herself emotionally for two decades by immersing herself in the company, culture and care of dragons, she too is slow to melt and acclimatize back into the outside world she once knew. Like the protracted war between Vikings and dragons, Valka’s alienation from Berk and her family is a difficult habit to break.

Despite being separated from Valka for two decades, Stoick remembers their life together intimately. He knows how to reach out and comfort her, as Astrid knew how to comfort Hiccup in their first scene together in this movie. Taking an indirect approach, Stoick whistles an old tune familiar to both he and Valka. Gobber remembers it too, voicing his approval. Hiccup watches in amazement as his father approaches his mother, embraces her and sings the lyrics of a song to which they courted so long ago. The hair of both characters is streaked with gray, visually evoking their age and memories long past.

“For the Dancing and the Dreaming” is unabashedly romantic, conveying simply yet profoundly the capacity of love to render life’s rough journey bearable. For all of his loud, larger-than-life ways, Stoick can be surprisingly gentle when so moved. Contributing comic relief, Gobber sings a line from the song loudly and out of tune. Stoick is annoyed at the disruption of his own performance. Grumpy is startled out of his nap. As a member of the audience, Gobber is supposed to observe but not interfere. On a more serious note, could this be the song old Gobber wanted to sing to Valka many years ago, before she married Stoick instead?

Taking Valka’s hand in his, Stoick renews his age-old courtship of her, but loses heart when she fails to respond. Perhaps she no longer loves him. But then she breaks through what remains of her icy shell and picks up the tune and lyrics where he left off. The song becomes a duet,
progressing from tender and tentative to rollicking, confident and choreographed. Caught up in
the moment, Gobber joins in, with Hiccup as his involuntary dance partner. Poor Toothless is
frightened away by their odd behavior. It’s not in his dragon vocabulary. As the song concludes,
Gobber’s braying voice lingers in the air after the others have finished. But by now his intrusion
is accepted and appreciated as part of a family-wide celebration.

Now that Valka is more comfortable in the presence of her original family, Stoick kneels down
on one knee and proposes to her. He wants her to return home with him as his wife, and for all of
them to be a family again. Hiccup joins them. Toothless plays his supportive role by nudging a
hesitant Valka closer to her lover, the same way Maximus pushed a reluctant Eugene into
accepting Rapunzel’s invitation to join her in the village dance. Valka happily consents. Gobber
joins the group huddle, adding, “Great! I’ll do the cookin’.” Always providing the antidote to
sentimentality, he is nevertheless a sentimental slob.

As the family hug disbands so they can resume preparing dinner, Stoick thanks Hiccup for
ignoring his previous orders not to fly off in search of Drago. “We (he and Valka) never would
have found each other,” he adds. For the first time since Dragon, he expresses appreciation for
his son’s adventurous ways. For the first time in Dragon 2, everything is working out according
to Hiccup’s wishes. Just like Rapunzel and Eugene in the gondola, about to kiss for the first time
after a long and previously contentious acquaintance. Then, suddenly, their private paradise is
shattered by the return of Mother Gothel and the Stabbington Brothers. Drago plays the same
role in Dragon 2. But in fairy tale terms, both intrusions of evil are necessary for our hero and
heroine to face their greatest tests and become their best selves.

Toothless and Cloudjumper sense trouble first, before all hell breaks loose and domestic bliss
evaporates. All the other sanctuary dragons flee en masse as the ice roof over their sanctuary begins to crumble. Valka rushes outside and sees a fleet of Drago’s ships and thousands of Drago’s soldiers poised to invade. They’re attacking the sanctuary’s ice roof with catapults. Stoick yields leadership to his wife, whose first command is, of course, “Save the dragons!” Hiccup and Gobber fall in line. The lines of alliance are clear, for the moment. It’s good versus evil in the starkest terms.

We accompany a group of Valka’s dragons from the sanctuary’s ice roof down to the chaotic battle on the shore. A big blue dragon crash lands into the sand, apparently struck and killed by enemy fire. It’s a foretaste of things to come, and a quick reminder of the cost of war. War that Hiccup is determined to pre-empt if he can. Drago’s military machine is colossal, and we haven’t even glimpsed his principle weapon yet. His strategy is to draw Valka’s Alpha Male out of sanctuary and into the battle, which at first glance seems suicidal.

Drago is ruthless but shrewd. He knows how to exploit his opponents’ emotional vulnerabilities, which most of us would consider virtues. Giant iron traps are baited with captive dragons to lure Valka’s dragons to fly to their rescue. The traps are sprung, imprisoning the rescuers. Drago, of course, would never make himself vulnerable by charging to the rescue of an ally. He has no allies—only slaves and worshippers. What Drago fails to anticipate, however, is an ambush by the young Vikings who escaped from his ship. Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Barf and Belch explode open one of the traps. Eret, riding Stormfly, hasn’t yet mastered the intricacies of dragon riding. But Astrid soon joins him and takes efficient control of their dragon.

Like the rousing music that accompanied Eret’s swashbuckling defeat of the enemy on board Drago’s ship, and the music that accompanies Eugene riding Maximus through the forest to
rescue Rapunzel in the tower in *Tangled*, the music that accompanies Hiccup and his allies as they ambush Drago’s forces is joyfully heroic, misleading us to expect a quick, total and glorious victory. Maneuvering to avoid a net launched at them, the twins pull their two-headed dragon in opposite directions, dislodging Ruffnut from her saddle and sending her plummeting to her doom. She calls out for Eret to rescue her. Surprisingly, the job is accomplished by her two mercilessly rejected suitors, Snotlout and Fishlegs. For once they set aside their rivalry and cooperate to do the right thing. And for the first time, Ruffnut appreciates their efforts. From her point of view, suspended between them, Snotlout and Fishlegs look more like Viking gods than contemptible losers.

Calling out “Yeah, baby!”, as he did during their peacetime exploits as well, Hiccup charges into battle on Toothless, followed by Gobber on Grumpy. The latter pair mow down a row of invaders like so many bowling pins. Hiccup greets his new friend and ally, Eret, then exchanges a few lighthearted comments with Astrid, explaining that he’s been “catching up with Mom,” who flies by overhead in full battle gear. Astrid is shocked. “That’s your *mother*?!” Hiccup brags in reply, “Now you know where I get my dramatic flair from,” then charges into battle. His self-assurance is at an all-time high. With dragons, Vikings, both his parents and former foe Eret on his side, and Valka’s Bewilderbeast waiting in the wings, surely he cannot lose a contest with Drago.

The Alpha Male rises into view behind Valka and Cloudjumper, adding to the impression of our heroes’ invincibility. Yet we already know Drago *wanted* to draw out the Alpha Male. He observes Hiccup, the rival dragon master Astrid informed him about, with keen interest. For the most part he’s anticipated the forces and tactics of his enemies. He knows their capabilities
better than they know his.

The battle on the ground appears to be a rout, until Valka is brought down by a catapulted net and must face Drago in person. Their brief hand-to-hand contest is a draw, until Drago summons forth his challenger to Valka’s Bewilderbeast. Ruthlessly sacrificing his own ships and men, positioned to conceal the rival beast, Drago calls his Alpha Male from the ocean depths.

“Another one?” Hiccup reacts with irritation but no alarm. Maybe he assumes he’s facing another Red Death, whom he defeated at the end of the first film. He certainly hasn’t made the connection between the ability of Valka’s benevolent Alpha Male to control the other sanctuary dragons and a potentially similar threat posed by an Alpha Male who reflects Drago’s malevolence. Dragon scholar Fishlegs has a greater appreciation of the danger. “Class Ten! Class Ten!” he warns.

Valka, on the other hand, knows full well the mortal threat posed by Drago’s giant challenger. Attacking Drago in a panic, she performs recklessly and is quickly subdued. Only Stoick’s timely intervention saves her from death. It’s quite a spectacle: four alpha males, including two dragons and two humans, simultaneously duel each other for supremacy in their species. The villains gain the upper hand, but the heroes get help from their allies. Gobber re-arms a disarmed Stoick, who fights back ably. Unfortunately, Drago’s Alpha Male defeats and kills Valka’s Bewilderbeast after a titanic struggle. The true cost of that defeat becomes evident only when the victor calls out to the sanctuary dragons, who flock to its side and bow down in abject submission, the pupils of their eyes narrowing to vertical, reptilian slits, as we witnessed on occasion in the first movie and in the television series. “We’ve won” declares Drago, commanding his Alpha Male to kill Valka, who flees on Cloudjumper.
The relationships of Valka and Drago to their Alpha Male dragons differ. Valka bowed down submissively before hers. Drago dominates and controls his, using it to fulfill his most violent and selfish wishes. Drago has cultivated and refined his dark side to a keen edge. He’s a Hitler with a most efficient and ruthless military force at his command. Valka is certainly capable of using her Alpha’s power for destructive purposes, as when she attacked and destroyed Eret’s fort. The danger of misuse always accompanies such power. But she was defending dragons from capture and enslavement by Drago and his agents. Drago’s only use for dragons is as slaves, and to make slaves of humans.

In swashbuckling style, Stoick flies to Valka’s rescue when she is knocked off Cloudjumper. Will they be joined by Hiccup and Toothless in a grand alliance to defeat the Alpha Male and Drago in battle? No. The son of Stoick tries a different approach to victory. He lands Toothless and confronts his rival dragon master with his original peace proposal. As he did when he confronted a Nightmare in the training arena five years earlier, Hiccup removes his helmet and tosses it aside, signaling his nonbelligerent intentions. He orders a protective Toothless to stay back when Drago laughs with contempt at the surprisingly small, physically unimposing son of Stoick the Vast. “What shame he must feel.” Stoick was ashamed, but no longer. Hiccup admirably refuses to succumb to the resentful anger that is often our reaction to insult and humiliation. Instead he tries to reason with his much bigger opponent. “All of this loss is a terrible waste. And for what? To become unstoppable? To rule the world?” This confrontation is equivalent to Hiccup’s appeal to Stoick on behalf of dragons late in the first movie.

The arrogant grin fades from Drago’s face. As with Eret’s, his attitude seems to soften, until Hiccup describes dragons as “kind, amazing creatures that can bring people together.” The
hostile, emotionally impenetrable grin returns to his rival’s face. “Or tear them apart” Drago replies bitterly, exposing the stump of his left shoulder by removing his artificial arm. Another limb lost in the dragon wars, like Hiccup’s foot, Toothless’s tail wing, Gobber’s hand and leg, and various parts of three of Valka’s dragons.

Circling his rival, Drago tells his dragon story. Much worse than the loss of an arm, he lost his village and his family to the beasts. He learned to fear dragons, then to conquer that fear “and liberate the people of the world” by conquering the objects of his fear. Hiccup points out the obvious hypocrisy of Drago’s private crusade. “Then why a dragon army?” “You need dragons to conquer other dragons” retorts Drago’s with glib cynicism. Hiccup challenges him again. “Or maybe you need dragons to conquer other people. To control those who follow you, and to get rid of those who won’t.” Drago concedes the truth of Hiccup’s accusation. His original feelings of fear, grief and helplessness triggered a craving for their opposites: revenge and power. Orphaned Flynn Rider craved material wealth and emotional solitude because he was denied the protection and affection of loving parents when he was a child. Thanks to Rapunzel, he discovered a better way. Hiccup desperately wanted to kill a dragon and prove his worth to his father and other Vikings, until he too forged a better way, with the help of a cooperative dragon.

Stoick thought he lost his wife to a dragon. Hiccup thought he lost his mother and did lose a leg and nearly his life to a dragon. Both overcame their fear and hatred to make peace with dragons, just as Rapunzel freed herself from fear of the outside world and her blind faith in Mother Gothel. Drago, however, lost more than he could bear, and so became what he once hated: a mythical, all-powerful, ruthlessly evil beast. He became hate itself, wallowing in its power to overcome his fear, then making of his private failure a worldwide crusade. Eret feared
Drago, but not so much that he couldn’t appreciate Hiccup’s and Stormfly’s courageous efforts on his behalf, and respond in kind.

Taking the offensive in his debate with Drago, Hiccup insists “the world wants peace, and we have the answer back on Berk. Just let me show you.” The fierceness of Drago’s reply suggests he is battling the temptation to accept Hiccup’s offer. He is not a heartless monster. He is, however, a fanatic, clinging tenaciously to his extreme position even in the face of what he recognizes is reasonable. He is Mother Gothel, neither wanting nor needing friends and allies, only lackeys.

As the debate between dragon masters reaches its climax, a snarling Toothless, positioned behind Hiccup, advances menacingly on Drago. His behavior is a measure of Hiccup’s temptation to yield to hatred as a cure for fear, as Drago did long ago. Hiccup is a human being, not a god. His restraint of Toothless is especially admirable because it is not guaranteed. But Drago refuses to respond in kind. Rejecting Hiccup’s offer to show him a better way of living, the diehard cynic roars triumphantly, “No! Let me show you!”

Screaming with rage and waving his staff of command, which resembles Valka’s but unlike hers is always used as a weapon, Drago commands his dragon double, the Alpha Male, to approach. He aims to win his philosophical debate with Hiccup by proving that hate conquers love as a cure for fear. Stoick, the experienced dragon fighter who learned a better way from his son, recognizes before anyone else what Drago has in mind for Hiccup. Urging Gobber, his most trusted ally, to follow him, he rushes to the aid of his son who along with Toothless is visually dwarfed by Drago and the Alpha Male.

The Alpha Male is Drago projected onto a massive canvass. The fear-conquering hatred and
violence of a Hitler or a Stalin imposed on the masses they ruled. Through the Alpha Male, Drago imposes his destructive will on all other dragons, and through those dragons on his own kind. The Alpha focuses its gaze, with reptilian pupils signaling instinctive fear and hostility, on Toothless. The smaller dragon struggles against losing self-control. Declares Drago, “Witness true strength! The strength of will over others!” It’s the only form of strength in which Drago believes, and it’s analogous to Mother Gothel ruthlessly dominating Rapunzel, framing Eugene and deceiving the Stabbington Brothers. Drago’s perspective is not tribal, like Stoick’s throughout most of the first movie and to some extent in this one. Instead, Drago intimidates and subjugates everyone within his sphere of influence. Despite his earlier claim to be defending humans against dragons, he treats both with equal contempt. Total control of everyone and everything around him is the only security he knows.

Hiccup is confused. On a conscious level, he cannot understand the battle raging inside his best friend--that part of himself he thought he had tamed and befriended (trained) so they could both thrive. The dragon whose power and loyalty he could ride from one peaceful triumph to another. But Toothless’ pupils narrow to vertical slits, more-so than they ever did in Dragon. His vision is constricted by fear and the hate. As he stalks a startled Hiccup, we briefly see the young Viking from his former best friend’s point of view, as a fuzzy black silhouette, an unrecognizable caricature (remember “The Eel Effect” television episode). Anticipating the violent end of what Hiccup and Toothless once assumed was an unbreakable friendship, Drago gloats over his impending triumph because it validates his twisted view of the world.

Toothless pursues a frightened Hiccup into a field of ice previously formed by the Alpha Male’s icy breath. It’s an appropriate symbol of the defensive-minded cold-heartedness Drago
embraces and promotes. The cold-heartedness Valka overcame within herself in order to reconnect with her long-lost family. We halfway expect the Night Fury to snap out of it, the way Hiccup overcame his initial impulse (similarly motivated by fear and hate, plus a desire to earn the respect of his father and all of Berk) to kill Toothless in the first movie. But Toothless is at present out of his mind, blinded by rage induced by an external source. Without a doubt he would kill his best friend if Stoick didn’t intervene by throwing himself between Hiccup and the dragon, taking the full brunt of a plasma blast.

The betrayal of Hiccup by Toothless shakes the very foundation of this and the previous film. It’s as if Eugene Fitzherbert, reverting to the worst of Flynn Rider, really had betrayed Rapunzel by taking the crown and leaving her to the less than tender mercies of the Stabbington Brothers, instead of being sabotaged by the Brothers to appear as if he’d done so. Once they conquered their distrust of each other, became friends and learned to fly as a team, Hiccup and Toothless seemed incapable of faltering. But now, with blinded eyes and retractable teeth fully deployed, Toothless looks every bit the fearsome monster of many a fairy tale. He is a shocking reminder that even heroes who have achieved self-awareness and emotional balance within themselves can backslide into chaos and evil.

Faced with death, Hiccup compassionately tries to stop Stoick from sacrificing himself. Valka arrives too late to attempt the same sacrifice, as she would doubtless have done for both husband and son. From an emotional as well as physical distance, we glance back with a departing Drago at his defeated enemies: a lifeless Stoick and a prostrate, grieving, disillusioned Hiccup, both now tiny, powerless figures compared to their much larger conqueror in the foreground. Curiously, the victor neither laughs nor shouts his triumph. Instead, with a mere “Hmmm” and a
trace of a smile, he turns away from his victims and departs, satisfied that events have confirmed the validity of his cynicism. He is convinced the outcome of his battle with the idealistic Hiccup was inevitable.

Breathing heavily with shock and disbelief, Hiccup glances over at his father’s body. The fierce red dragon insignia on his shoulder, originally a whimsical tribute to the power of his dragon friend, now matches his real view of Toothless. We all carry within ourselves a grudging attraction to the power of ferocity. We fear and admire it at the same time. We often name our athletic teams after variations of it. We enjoy beating a rival team, just as the residents of Berk cheered for their favorite, fiercely painted dragon riders during the opening scene of this movie. But we seldom desire to literally enslave or exterminate others. Hiccup’s insignia is of a kind with the fierce, mythical portrayal of dragons in the Book of Dragons he consulted and ultimately rejected in the first movie. But now it symbolizes a struggle occurring within Hiccup: the same struggle Drago fought and lost when he suffered a grievous loss many years ago, and thereafter resolved to conquer dragons rather than make peace with them.

It’s a breathless moment of suspense as Hiccup’s gaze shifts from Stoick to Toothless. Where will Hiccup go from here, emotionally speaking? Toothless, like Hiccup, breathes heavily, with pupils still narrowed. He remains in a trance, uncomprehending, all instinctive reaction, no thought. Looking away from the dragon, Hiccup rushes to his father’s side and pushes chunks of ice off Stoick’s still warm body, struggling to undo what Drago, the Alpha Male and Toothless did. He tries unsuccessfully to roll Stoick the Vast over onto his back, calling out “Dad!” in anguish. Never have Hiccup’s physical shortcomings seemed so pronounced, especially in contrast to the great physical strength his father once possessed. No doubt the
young man is acutely aware of his comparative weakness. What a crushing contrast between
Hiccup now and in the first scene, when we saw him conquering the sky with apparent ease,
accompanied by a dragon double in whom he had complete trust.

Valka rushes to Hiccup’s side and together they roll Stoick face up. She presses her ear to her
husband’s chest and listens for a heartbeat, the same way Stoick listened for Hiccup’s after
battling the Red Death. We, the audience, anticipate a happy replay of that earlier scene. If
Stoick recovered now, the impact of Toothless’s betrayal of Hiccup, and the battles, internal and
external, Hiccup still has to fight in order to earn his status as Chief, would be dramatically
diminished. But it doesn’t happen that way, which is a tribute to the creators of *Dragon 2.*
Reviving Stoick would make life seem much too predictable for the wildly unpredictable world
of Vikings.

Drago’s Alpha Male redirects its mesmerizing gaze away from Toothless and towards the
swarm of dragons circling overhead. Toothless shakes off the effects of the Alpha’s mind
control, his pupils returning to normal. Suddenly he’s puppy dog cute again, at odds with the
violent consequences of his recent actions. Astrid rushes to Hiccup’s side and tries to comfort
him. Gobber does the same. It’s another family portrait, like the one during the meal preparation
at the beginning this scene, but under extremely different circumstances.

Toothless tries to re-join the family unit He’s puzzled by the sight of Stoick’s motionless body,
completely unaware of what he’s done. He tries to rouse Stoick by nudging him, the way he
playfully nudged Hiccup awake when the boy was recovering at home after the Red Death battle.
But this time Hiccup angrily pushes him away. The bond of friendship between them is
shattered. Valka, whose empathy with dragons was for twenty years stronger than her empathy
with humans, tries to play diplomat between her son and Toothless. “It’s not his fault,” she reasons. “Good dragons under the control of bad people do bad things.” Drago’s Alpha Male overwhelmed the balance of reason and passion represented by the Hiccup/Toothless partnership. Hiccup is too grief-stricken and guilt-ridden to respond immediately. But the sympathetic presence of Valka, Astrid and Gobber has much to do with the survival of Hiccup’s better nature and his eventual forgiveness of Toothless. But what if, as happened to Drago, all of Hiccup’s family and friends had been taken from him at once? Would he possess the strength on his own to resist his worst impulses? Or would he have become an even more ruthless villain than did Drago Bludvist? Would Rapunzel have descended to the selfish depravity of Mother Gothel, or worse, if Eugene really had betrayed her or if Gothel succeeded in convincing her that he had?

With a roar the Alpha Male summons all other dragons to follow him. Fishlegs and Snotlout are shocked to see Meatlug and Hook Fang depart. Toothless, again in a trance, tries to do the same but is hobbled by his mechanical tail wing. He is not whole without a rider. Drago grabs the floundering dragon and pulls him to the ground with his staff of command. He then arrogantly climbs on the dragon’s back and bends him to his will. Riding the dragon of his defeated rival, Drago leads the Alpha Male and his captive army in the direction of Berk.

Taking his mother’s advice to heart, Hiccup calls out for Toothless but gets no response. He watches helplessly as his best friend flies away with the enemy of everything he believes, to destroy his home village. In fairy tale terms this moment is equivalent to the scene in *Dragon* where Hiccup watches helplessly while Stoick, after refusing to accept his son’s plea for peace with dragons, sails away with a shackled Toothless in tow to locate and destroy the dragons’ nest. And to Rapunzel watching Eugene sail away with her stolen crown after apparently
betraying her. How Hiccup and Rapunzel react to these crises will depend on their maturity and strength of character. She can either succumb to and become a reflection of the bitter, selfish, cynical Mother Gothel, or declare her independence and fight to save Eugene. Hiccup can either give up and emulate Drago’s cynicism, or try to save both his best friend and his village from that monstrously immature attitude.

It’s curious that two parental figures, Stoick and Mother Gothel, must die in order for their children to achieve full maturity and independence in these two fairy tales. As parents, they differ greatly. Mother Gothel was the evil alter ego of Rapunzel’s two real parents, the loving King and Queen, from whom the young Princess would have had to rebel and declare her independence at some point in her life. Gothel, in effect, wore the villain’s mask in order to justify Rapunzel’s rebellion and soften the guilt of hurting her parents, who remained conveniently offstage during her struggle. But Mother Gothel also set the grim example of what Rapunzel might have become if she had failed in that journey to become her best self. After succeeding, she was able to jettison her anger and embrace her real parents as an adult of equal standing.

In *How to Train Your Dragon* Hiccup at first tried and failed to be like his father. Then he rebelled against Stoick, the legendary dragon killer, by choosing a better way of life, making peace rather than war with dragons. In other words, Hiccup tamed and trained the emotional dragon within himself. At the end of the movie he defeated the enormous Red Death, killing off the symbolic representative of his father’s fear and rage. But Stoick survived the destruction of his dragon double and was liberated from his narrow bigotries. Father and son reconciled, yet Stoick remained Chief of a reformed Berk. At the end of *Tangled*, Rapunzel’s inheritance of
her parents' kingdom was implied in Eugene's narration. Hiccup still has work to do before completing the same journey to independence.

In *Dragon 2* the power struggle between father and son is renewed in terms very different from the first movie. Stoick claims he wants to make his son Chief of Berk, though frequently demonstrates his reluctance to give up the reins of power. Hiccup, on the other hand, is plagued by doubts about his ability to perform as Chief. Can he match his father in that role? Added to that struggle is Hiccup's troubled reunion with his mother, who in some ways treats him as though he were the baby she left behind twenty years earlier. There are moments when he's tempted to return to that state of dependency: first, when Valka touches his cheek after he crash lands in a snow bank; second, when his parents agree to reunite their family as it was in the old days.

But as it was with Mother Gothel, Stoick must die, at least in the symbolic terms of a fairy tale, before Hiccup can become his own man. Of course Stoick's death at the hands of Toothless, Hiccup's dragon double, though darkly suggestive of patricide, is not quite the same as Mother Gothel's death at the hands of Rapunzel's animal double, Pascal. Stoick died sacrificing himself to save his son, as any good father would. Mother Gothel died after trying to reduce Rapunzel once more to a state of slavery and to kill Rapunzel's new, adult dream of a love with Eugene.

Stoick's death leaves Hiccup facing an enormous mountain to climb before he achieves full maturity. He must overcome feelings of guilt, anger and sorrow over Stoick's death, forgive himself for the miscalculation (about Drago) that led to that death and to his best friend's enslavement (remember his earlier promise to Toothless that he would let nothing bad happen to the dragon), conquer his sense of helplessness in the face of Drago's imposing power, and avoid
adopting the cynicism that fuels that power. Drago is what Hiccup could become if he weakens at this stage of the journey, just as Rapunzel could end up another bitter Mother Gothel if she fails.

Stoick receives a traditional Viking funeral. Gobber intones a prayer for his old friend. Off-screen voices hum the song Stoick and Valka sang to each other long ago and again more recently. This time Hiccup participates solemnly in a Viking ritual rather than defying it. If there is a fairy tale tradition of children overthrowing and displacing their parents as a secret wish-fulfillment, this is a highly ironic example of it, because Stoick sacrificed himself for Hiccup and Hiccup tried to save his father by waving him away from danger. Even Rapunzel tried to save her much less admirable parent, Mother Gothel, from death.

Hiccup faces unpleasant choices. He could revert to hating all dragons as a way of honoring the old memory of his father and punishing himself for being naïve. But that would entail turning his back on independence and rejecting the wisdom he gained while defying his father. He could embrace Drago’s cynicism by ruthlessly manipulating and enslaving everyone who crosses his path, infecting them with his bitterness and using their power to ensure his own. Or he could forge a new path combining his inclination to be a peacemaker with Stoick’s more cautionary outlook and fierce devotion to protecting his family and village.

Shedding a tear, Hiccup fires a flaming arrow into the sky. It lands on a battered old Viking boat carrying Stoick’s body out to sea. Astrid, Valka, Snotlout, Tuffnut, Ruffnut, Fishlegs and new friend Eret (the result of Hiccup’s peacemaking efforts) follow suit, all hitting the mark in a show of solidarity. At this solemn moment there is no trace left of adolescent distraction among Hiccup’s peers. They have all become mature adults. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say they
all demonstrate their capacity for maturity when it counts, since even mature adults can behave foolishly now and then. Some never outgrow that impulse.

Stoick’s Viking helmet rests on top of his shrouded corpse. A larger version of the one Hiccup discarded five years earlier, when he tried to befriend the dragon he was supposed to kill in the arena. “I’m sorry, Dad,” Hiccup apologizes to his father’s disappearing body. He never anticipated that his desire to make peace and prevent many deaths would result in the death of his father. Astrid watches Hiccup with great sympathy, her fond smile expressing continued amazement at his great heart. Fishlegs openly weeps, which is no surprise, but so do tough guy Snotlout and the usually unsentimental twins. There is no bickering on this occasion.

Hiccup is still unsure of himself. He’s not “the Chief [Stoick] wanted me to be,” but neither is he “the peacemaker I thought I was.” He is momentarily adrift, without a rudder. It was at such a moment that Drago, deprived of family, friends, home and self-respect, turned to hate and a ruthless drive to regain power through brute force. Presumably he had no one to encourage whatever remained of his better nature. Hiccup has both friends and a mother, who now approaches him as Stoick’s funeral barge, flaming brightly, recedes into the distance. In Hiccup’s mind, Stoick has already become an unmatchable myth.

Stroking Hiccup’s hair and touching his shoulder, comforting the needy child that is never entirely extinguished in any of us, Valka speaks for the absent Stoick. Despite Hiccup’s premature birth and small size, she observes, Stoick knew he would not only survive, but become “the strongest of us all. He was right. You have the heart of a Chief and the soul of a dragon. Only you can bring our worlds together. That is who you are, son.” Note the important difference between what Valka tells her son now and what she told him earlier: “This is what it is to be a
"dragon." Not a dragon and a chief. The disparate "worlds" Hiccup must bring together are more inside than outside himself. At last, Hiccup receives an answer to the question he asked of himself earlier in the film, when Astrid assured him the answer was within him rather than somewhere "out there." Reconciling the different points of view of grieving son and dead, self-sacrificing father, Valka suggests a middle path combining Hiccup's revolutionary inclinations with his father's more conservative, traditional outlook—a path shaped by Hiccup's love of peace, respect for others and boundless curiosity, yet chastened by a recognition that not everyone or everything in this world will respond in kind to those admirable qualities.

Hiccup's victory over himself in Dragon 2 is accomplished with the help of his mother. In Dragon it was Astrid who fortified him when he was overwhelmed with self-doubt. In Tangled, after returning to the tower with Mother Gothel following Eugene's alleged betrayal, Rapunzel must overcome disappointment and disillusionment on her own, though she does so with old memories of her real parents and their love for her, and an abiding faith in the sincerity of Eugene's love for her (the purple banner he gave her during the village celebration).

Valka withdraws, recognizing now, as she didn't earlier, the limits of her parental role. The decision must be Hiccup's. Standing alone, facing the glow of his father's funeral pyre, he stammers in reply. Admitting to himself that he was afraid of failure, which is what impelled him to flee Berk at the beginning of the movie, he delivers a final, glowing tribute to the father with whom he frequently disagreed, then turns to his friends and in a firm voice repeats the words Stoick once spoke to him about the responsibilities of leadership. "A Chief protects his own. We're going back." Back to Berk, not back to Stoick's once inflexible attitude towards outsiders. After all, the Vikings are returning to Berk with Eret, a new ally who only a short time ago was a
stranger and an enemy. And they are not returning to kill the dragons who betrayed them, but to rescue those dragons from Drago, his perverted Alpha Male and their own worst instincts.

Astrid smiles at Hiccup’s new determination, as she did five years ago when she coaxed the same from him at the equivalent moment of crisis in *Dragon*. The skeptical twins remind Hiccup they have no way of getting back to Berk without their dragons. Hiccup replies with a grin, as he did in the first film when he told Astrid he was going to do something “crazy.” Drago’s Alpha Male has power over all dragons except for the babies, who remain stubbornly self-willed. “Just like us!” Tuffnut adds proudly. Teenage bravado from someone who is no longer just a kid, but is certainly familiar with childish behavior.

Like Hiccup’s first attempts at flight with Toothless, the Vikings barely survive their maiden voyage on the backs of baby dragons. Fittingly it is Gobber, the oldest of the Vikings, who experiences the most difficulty adjusting to his infant companion. Still challenging authority with humor, he describes Hiccup’s plan as “poorly conceived” and requests clarification. Hiccup responds with a touch of bravado straight out of Snotlout’s and the twins’ playbook. “Get Toothless back and kick Drago’s [ass].” It’s a simple, straightforward battle-cry, uncomplicated by self-doubt. Not unlike Rapunzel’s blunt rejection of Mother Gothel’s lies and authority as she leaves her prison tower in order to rescue Eugene from the hanging to which Gothel condemned him. For the time being, Hiccup suppresses his sensitive side and becomes more like his late father.

Drago’s surprise attack on Berk begins at night. A flock of Terrible Terrors sleeping securely on top of Gothi, their surrogate mother, suddenly awaken. Their pupils narrow and they abandon their human friend to join the approaching Alpha Male. They may look like baby dragons
because of their small size, but they are adults and therefore vulnerable to fanatical regimentation. In another Viking home a Gronckle abandons his blissful bedtime rubdown to blindly join the ranks of Drago’s army.

Drago’s Alpha Male crashes through the very mountain on which Berk is built, destroying massive stone sculptures that greeted us at the beginning of both Dragon movies. Everything in and about Berk is threatened with obliteration. Riding Toothless, Drago cruelly reveals Stoick’s death to the villagers assembled below him, shattering their confidence before ordering the Alpha to attack. So much for Drago’s claim that he wants to protect Vikings from dragons. He’s merely perverted the power of dragons in order to dominate his own kind.

Hiccup and his ragtag air force arrive to see Drago’s Alpha Male destroying their home. The new Chief, in all but name, orders his allies to distract the Alpha Male from Toothless. When Tuffnut expresses doubt about their ability to do so, the group’s newest member and former foe, Eret, proves his worth by injecting a note of confidence into their effort. Hiccup’s peacemaking efforts, though not at the forefront of this particular encounter, has already paid benefits. And if Eret hadn’t previously saved the lives of Astrid, Snotlout, Fishlegs and the twins, they would not now be present to help Hiccup battle Drago and the Alpha Male.

The team that once helped Hiccup conquer the Red Death now takes mischievous delight in annoying the Alpha Male. But as in the first movie, Hiccup carries the biggest burden. Hovering in front of Toothless, he risks fiery death to persuade his old friend to come back to him. And he does so by offering forgiveness for what Toothless did to Stoick--something Drago was not able to do when his family was killed. Amused by his rival’s ludicrous attempt to liberate Toothless, Drago allows the action to take place in front of his own eyes, relishing the prospect of Hiccup’s
inevitable failure and subsequent death. Drago could easily order Hiccup’s immediate execution by either fire (Toothless) or ice (the Alpha Male). Yet he is so convinced of his superior power, and in a larger sense of the superiority of his cynical view of human and dragon nature, that he grants Hiccup time to present his argument to Toothless.

Toothless fights to break free of the Alpha Male’s spell. He succeeds fitfully, his retractable teeth alternately appearing and disappearing. Drago is fascinated by Hiccup’s ability to arouse the best in Toothless—an ability Drago himself does not possess. “How are you doing that?” he puzzles. When to his great surprise he loses control of Toothless, he tries to beat the dragon back into submission. But Toothless rips the tyrant’s staff of command out of his hands and bucks him off. Unable to fly without a rider, Toothless plunges towards the ground. Hiccup leaps off his baby dragon and plummets after him, catching up to Toothless and deploying the dragon’s artificial tail wing just in time to avoid disaster for them both. These two characters experienced the same perilous situation in Dragon, which serves them well now. Hiccup’s rescue of Toothless in this scene is also fair compensation for the two earlier episodes in Dragon 2 when the dragon rescued the glider Hiccup from almost certain death.

Because Toothless still struggles against the Alpha’s influence, Hiccup covers his eyes with a piece of cloth and asks for his friend’s complete trust: the same trust Hiccup displayed when he extended his hand in friendship while averting his eyes five years ago, back at the cove. Hiccup will be the dragon’s eyes, for the time being. “You and me as one” signals a restoration of the friendship they enjoyed before the Alpha Male divided them. In a larger sense, it’s a restoration of balance within these characters, each of whom is stronger in harmony with than divided from the other.
To the collective cheers of all Berk, Hiccup and Toothless stage a frontal attack on the Alpha Male, veering away at the last possible moment to avoid a blast of ice, just as they avoided the Red Death’s blasts of fire in *Dragon*. Drago misinterprets their evasive maneuver as a retreat. Instead, it’s a deliberate bluff by Hiccup, who leaves Toothless in order to envelope the Alpha Male in Zippleback gas and then ignite it, knocking Drago off the Alpha. Formerly the victim of Drago’s divide and conquer tactics, Hiccup now returns the favor.

Deploying his newly discovered dorsal fins, which are Valka’s important contribution to the outcome of this battle, Toothless rescues Hiccup from the Alpha’s menacing tail. In the first movie they were *not* able to avoid the Red Death’s flailing tail. Together they bolt skyward. Mutual rescues are the norm among Hiccup and his friends. Drago, by contrast, is always concerned only with himself, making personal sacrifices for no one else.

Back on the ground, Hiccup uses his flaming sword to divide Drago from his staff of command. He assumes that staff is the source of Drago’s power over the Alpha Male, but he’s made another potentially fatal miscalculation. Assuming the battle is won, Hiccup is unprepared when attacked from behind by the Alpha Male. Toothless charges to the rescue, in the same way Stoick did when Drago ordered Toothless to attack the young man. Enveloping Hiccup within his protective wings, as he did when they both fell into the Red Death’s fiery inferno, the Night Fury takes the full impact of a direct hit from the Alpha’s frigid breath. He and Hiccup are sealed inside a mountain of jagged ice. Their survival after immersion in fire at the end of *Dragon* leads us to expect the same result this time. But the recent death of Stoick, which contradicted Hiccup’s survival in the first movie, leaves us in some doubt.

Now it’s Drago’s turn to misread the situation and assume victory. Valka struggles in vain to
break through the ice that imprisons her son. Astrid and Gobber stand by, equally powerless, until a plasma-colored glow from within the ice expands and eventually shatters the frigid tomb. Heat defeats cold. Hiccup is alive, shielded from harm by the wings of his dragon. Toothless, for the first time in his life glowing blue with plasma power, leaps to the top of a mammoth spike of ice and challenges Drago’s Alpha Male directly. “To protect you,” Valka informs Hiccup. Friendship, courage and self-sacrifice challenge total selfishness. Toothless overcomes in this scene what Hiccup overcame in *Dragon* when he spared Toothless’ life.

Firing bursts of plasma at the beast who once dominated him, Toothless distracts the Alpha Male sufficiently for Stormfly and the other dragons to break free of its spell and join forces with Toothless and the Vikings of Berk. Just as the “thugs and ruffians” in *Tangled*, liberated from their evil compulsions by Rapunzel, freed Eugene from prison so he could rescue her. Reunited with Toothless, Hiccup confronts a defiant Drago. “This is what it means to earn a dragon’s loyalty,” as opposed to commanding its abject obedience, as Drago does the Alpha Male’s.

Returning to the role of peacemaker, a role he does not abandon in spite of the occasional necessity of harsher methods, Hiccup gives Drago a last chance to change his ways. “Let this end now.” But the older dragon master is intransigent. “Never!” He is incapable of changing his ways or outlook, the way Hiccup, Toothless, Astrid, Stormfly, Stoick, Valka, Eret and others did over the course of two films. Drago’s mind and heart froze solid long ago, to borrow a metaphor from *his* dragon. He and Mother Gothel are the same. Neither of them ever completed their journey to maturity.

The Alpha Male slavishly obeys Drago’s command to attack, but is met with a hail of fire from all the dragons of Berk. One last charge by the beleaguered giant, again ordered by Drago, is
beaten back by a mighty plasma blast from Toothless. No longer intimidated or dominated by the much larger dragon, he launches fireballs directly into the Alpha Male’s open maw, blowing off one of the giant’s tusks. The mammoth dragon staggers back, retreating before the roar of his conqueror. “The Alpha Male protects them all,” declares Hiccup while patting Toothless on the head. The pupils of the new Alpha Male narrow like those of the old one when he turns aggressive: a reminder of the danger inherent in such power. No one is immune to its intoxicating effects. But some, like Toothless and Hiccup, can control it better than others. The defeated Alpha plunges into the sea and disappears, along with his former master, Drago. Toothless does not pursue for the kill—a show of mercy his foe did not extend to Valka’s Alpha Male. All the Vikings and dragons of a reunited Berk celebrate victory, gathering around Hiccup and Toothless. Cloudjumper, the larger, older dragon whom Toothless once tried to solicit as a surrogate parent, approaches and bows before the new Alpha Male. Child replaces parent, becoming the master of his own destiny. Toothless holds his head high, looking very regal as he accepts his new leadership role. The other dragons bow their heads. Toothless lets out a roar. They follow his example, illustrating the sober responsibility of his new role as their leader. If he leads them down the wrong path, he would be no better than Drago’s Alpha Male.

Toothless is a new type of Alpha Male, from a different species than the two giants who preceded him. Like Hiccup, he is smaller and younger. His strength does not lie in sheer bulk and the ability to intimidate. Like Hiccup in the first film, Toothless had to overcome the fear and rage within himself before he could assume a leadership role. Otherwise he would be a slave to the worst in himself, as were Drago and the Red Death. And there is always another Drago lurking somewhere just over the horizon.
The new Alpha Male descends from his royal perch and approaches Hiccup like the old buddies they were and are again. Hiccup humbly thanks his best friend for saving their village. Toothless rewards him with a sloppy barrage of licks. Following his good example, the other dragons rush to their own Viking families. In their passionate rush to reunite with Hook Fang and Meatlug, Snotlout and Fishlegs ignore Ruffnut, who is surprisingly disappointed by their disinterest. If she wants the attention of either in the future, she’ll have to earn it.

The one dragon without a Viking to return to is Skull Crusher. Note the difference in the names Stoick and Hiccup chose for their respective dragons. Hiccup named his Toothless, as humble as his own name. Stoick chose Skull Crusher, advertising an aggression of which the Chief was certainly capable, but to which he was no longer committed, thanks to his son’s benevolent influence. Hiccup generously grants Eret custody of his father’s dragon. “I’d be honored” the former dragon trapper replies. Life goes on, even in the aftermath of Stoick’s tragic death. Two more friendships begin: Hiccup and Eret, Eret and Skull Crusher. But if there is to be a third entry in the Dragon series, Eret’s inheritance of the former Chief’s dragon, like Astrid’s curious reaction when Eret rescued her from Drago’s soldiers, could signal potential conflicts ahead. It depends on where the screenwriters want to take this complicated fairy tale. There is no “The End” to the lives of these characters until they are killed off or no more stories are written.

Valka joins Hiccup and Toothless, reassembling their family unit. Unlike Drago, Hiccup is a humble leader. He doesn’t even strike a regal pose the way Toothless briefly did. Instead he graciously accepts his mother’s praise, and is once again the willing butt of Astrid’s good-natured ribbing. “See, I told you it was in you” she reminds him, poking him in the chest and deploying his mechanical dorsal fin, the way she did in their first scene together. He laughs it off
as a joke at his own expense. Imagine how Drago would have reacted if one of his subjects had dared to touch him, much less pulled a joke on him.

But the new Chief of Berk is not above asserting his authority just a little. He grabs Astrid and plants a big kiss on her lips. In the first movie she was the romantic aggressor, twice. This is the first time we’ve seen Hiccup stake a romantic claim to Astrid. Gobber, as usual counterpointing the sentiment of the moment, shields the eyes of a curious Viking child watching the kissing couple. Perhaps the inquisitive youngster will become his next blacksmith apprentice.

Gothi intrudes on the humorous byplay to remind everyone of what has occurred in this scene, and to formalize it with ritual. The village elder, to whose judgment even Stoick deferred on occasion, nudges Hiccup with her staff of authority. She signals him to approach. He humbly kneels before her. She marks him with the symbol of village chief on his forehead. Not some jewel-encrusted crown of gold, but a symbol made of black soot from a charred piece of battle wreckage. The rebuilding of Berk will be the new Chief’s first task. It’s appropriate that his “crown” evokes responsibility and hard work rather than glory. Rapunzel too, despite the jeweled crown she wore at the end of Tangled, behaved humbly towards her “subjects.” Symbols are subject to context.

Hiccup stands. Gobber approaches him. They exchange expressions of proud father and worthy son that Hiccup was not able to exchange with Stoick. Gobber is a fitting substitute, having mentored Hiccup through difficult years when the boy was essentially shunned by his father and deprived of his mother. And Gobber has no son of his own to celebrate. Each fills a need for the other.

“The Chief has come home!” declares Gobber. Rejoicing breaks out all around as we watch the
celebration from Hiccup’s and Astrid’s point of view. Nervous, emitting a small sigh, Hiccup is nevertheless in control of his emotions. He bows slightly in acknowledgement of the villagers’ unanimous approval—perhaps the last time any humble leader will ever experience such popularity, until his death and frozen deification in some monument. Such moments of affirmation and solidarity inevitably yield to the humdrum of everyday life. The dragons of Berk launch simultaneous blasts of flame into the sky, forming a triumphant, collective smoke ring over a scene of devastation. Berk lies shattered amid giant spears of ice left over from the deposed Alpha Male. But its residents will rebuild and persevere.

The resumption of Berk’s routine begins in the final scene, to the revival of background music we heard during the first appearance of Hiccup and Toothless in the movie. We re-join the village in the middle of another dragon race. A plucky little Terrible Terror struggles to lift a bored sheep, reminding us of the seemingly impossible tasks Hiccup set for himself in both movies. Tuffnut and Ruffnut, once incompetent dragon fighters now turned more than competent dragon riders, show the little guy how it’s done, swooping down to capture the sheep. But some things haven’t changed much. Sibling competition between the twins fumbles the sheep to Fishlegs, until Snotlout steals the prize and drops it into his net. No longer do Snotlout and Fishlegs slavishly yield their prizes to Ruffnut in hopes of winning her favor. Eret joins the competition, looking much more comfortable riding Skull-Crusher than he did earlier riding Stormfly or a baby dragon.

Not participating in the competition, as was the case in the film’s first scene but this time for very different reasons, Hiccup and Toothless participate instead in the hard work of re-building Berk. They take their chiefly duties seriously. Hiccup glances over at the dragon racers having
fun. Though they’ve certainly demonstrated their loyalty and courage in a crisis, they have not
grown up quite as much as has he. Hiccup then glances at a massive sculpture of Stoick being
hewn into a rocky cliff above the village. He’s proud of his late father. But even though Stoick is
now enshrined as a myth, Hiccup no longer lives in his giant shadow. He honors but does not
bow submissively to his father’s legacy, any more than he did to his mother’s Alpha dragon.

Hiccup provides the story’s Epilog as narrator. It’s a variation on the Prologs and Epilog that
preceded it. “This is Berk. A bit trampled and busted and covered in ice. But it’s home. It’s our
home. Those who attacked us are relentless and crazy. But those who stopped them, even more
so.” On-screen Hiccup casts a watchful eye out to sea, looking out for Berk’s security. Astrid
streaks past him on Stormfly, flirting with him Viking style. “We may be small in numbers,”
continues narrator Hiccup, giving us the big picture while his on-screen self is preoccupied with
more immediate concerns. “But we stand for something bigger than anything the world can pit
against us. We are the voice of peace. And bit by bit, we will change the world.” Despite his
failure with Drago, Hiccup has not abandoned his role as peacemaker, even though it’s now
tempered with caution rooted in experience of the danger always present in that world.

Valka and Gobber remove the armored headpiece from one of Drago’s former dragons, now
peacefully at home in Berk. Perhaps Gobber will melt and re-shape that armor into something
more useful in his, for the moment, peaceful village. And if the old blacksmith harbors secret
feelings for Stoick’s widow, he at least gets to work beside her in the restoration of Berk.

Effortlessly mixing work with play, Gobber pauses to launch a black sheep into the air with a
catapult. Friendly competition has once again taken the place of violent rivalry. We’ve returned
to the movie’s first scene, though with some sobering developments between then and now.
Astrid and Stormfly charge in to capture the black sheep and win yet another dragon race, only to be bested by Hiccup on Toothless, who take a brief break from work in order to have some fun and reclaim their competitive pre-eminence. Toothless looks back at Astrid with a big, upside down grin on his face. That's the smile he learned from Hiccup when they got acquainted in *Dragon*. It's part of the mutually beneficial cultural exchange that gave, among many other things, the power of flight to Vikings, friendship and technology (artificial wings and dentistry) to dragons. Astrid grins back in amazement and affection at her one-of-a-kind boyfriend and his one-of-a-kind dragon. Like Rapunzel, Hiccup has triumphed at the end of a long, perilous, heroic journey.

Flying Toothless with his usual dramatic flair, Hiccup performs a spectacular jump/run/re-mount maneuver (the same maneuver Astrid executed in the film's first scene) and deposits the prize-winning black sheep in his net. The narrator puts this Viking celebration into a broader context. "You see, we have something they don't. Oh, sure, they have armies and they have armadas. But we ... we have ... our *dragons!*" Or to put it another way, our *trained* dragons. Not the monsters of rage and destruction they seemed to be at the start of the first film, and again when Drago took control of them in this one. Hiccup and Toothless land on the Chief's podium, with Astrid nearby. Toothless lets out a mighty roar of triumph, celebrating a victory not only in dragon racing but, more importantly, in a way of life. Maybe even a *triple* victory, since this animated fairy tale is primarily about Hiccup's heroic progression from undersized, incompetent, lonely, disrespected and deeply frustrated adolescent to a mature, compassionate, highly successful adult.

The song "Where No One Goes" plays out during the closing credits of *How to Train Your*
Dragon 2. An exhilarating piece, its lyrics celebrate the boundless spirit of curiosity and openness embodied by Hiccup and Toothless. “We go where no one goes. We slow for no one. Get out of our way!” builds on lyrics from “Sticks & Stones” at the end of the first movie: “Eyes open wide,” “Bursting through the seams” and “Let yourself go.” Like all good anthems, it crystallizes a brilliant moment in time: a moment of achievement and realization that must inevitably yield to, though not be invalidated by, some degree of disappointment, frustration and the tedium of routine. Imagine Hiccup five years from now, spending his days settling petty disputes between quarrelsome villagers? Not every day can be a celebration. Yet this is a moment for Hiccup to remember always, especially during less inspiring times in his life.

Fairy tale reflections of their riders, dragons embody whatever humans are capable of thinking, feeling and doing: kindness, friendship and loyalty as well as fear, hatred, greed and violence. Hiccup had to overcome his fear of failure, humiliation and loneliness in order to spare the life of a Night Fury whose death could have erased those deficits. The fear of being unable to measure up to his father, the urge to return to the role of sheltered child when his mother returned to his life, the anger he felt towards Toothless when the dragon killed Stoick—these were all heroic tests to be confronted and overcome. Hiccup’s journey is paralleled by Rapunzel’s in Tangled. To earn her crown of maturity, she had to conquer her fear of the world outside her tower, including its strange and intimidating inhabitants, and quit relying on the stifling “protection” of Mother Gothel. As one happy result of her journey, she learned to trust Eugene Fitzherbert and in turn inspired his trust in her.

Tangled and the Dragon films are fairy tales portraying literally impossible events. Dinosaurs and humans, had they lived at the same time, would have made unlikely allies. Trigger and
Flicka and Fury aside, how concerned would a real horse be with enforcing human law? But as stylized, metaphorical and adventurous portrayals of the complicated process of growing up and facing challenges both internal and external, these three films are richly rewarding. Any adult who thinks he has left behind the conflicts so passionately and colorfully portrayed in these movies is probably fooling himself. Dragons may appear to adults in a different guise, but they still breathe fire and have big, scary teeth.
Selected Bibliography


