Negative Gender Roles and Stereotypes in Disney Films
An Analysis of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty

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Introduction

Disney has been a part of American culture since 1923. In the attempt to stick to the norm and portray stereotypical female characters, Disney created Princesses. Almost every little girl grew up watching these films and these Princesses are instantly recognizable in terms of their name, dress, story, and relationships. These types of movies target children and contribute to certain negative ideas and concepts about gender roles and stereotypes about young Caucasian women. Since the 1937 release of the first Princess movie, Disney has been teaching young girls to believe in traditional gender roles. Using such films as Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and Sleeping Beauty, we notice common characteristics amongst the main female characters. The young women in these films are domestic, nurturing, and likely to marry because they seem incomplete without a man. These women are presented as inferior beings to men, and her appearance is valued more than her intellect. In contrast, powerful women in these movies are portrayed as evil, ugly, and unpleasant (Towbin, et al., 2004).

The women in Disney movies often are portrayed as domestic housekeepers, such as Cinderella and Snow White. The princesses sing happily while they enjoy performing household chores, such as scrubbing the floor and other cleaning duties. Cinderella is portrayed as a woman without any value or purpose other than participating in domestic chores until she meets her Prince Charming. There is an extensive scene in the movie in which Cinderella is scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees. Lady Tremaine’s cat, Lucifer, decides to track dirt all over the newly cleaned floors, causing Cinderella to have to re-clean them. During this scene, Cinderella continues to sing the song “Sing Sweet Nightingale” (Cinderella, 1950), and only shoos the cat away, starting the task of cleaning the floors all over again. Although during the 1950’s when Cinderella was first produced it was common for women to be the housekeepers and to be submissive, children are still exposed to these ideas and stereotypes. Some companies have gone as far as to market Cinderella cleaning supplies.
Cinderella is seen scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees. She sings a song titled “Sing Sweet Nightingale” (*Cinderella*, 1950).

Once again, Cinderella is seen having to re-scrub the floors, thanks to her step-mothers cat that purposefully tracked dirt on them (*Cinderella*, 1950).

Snow White can also be seen displaying domestic traits as she becomes responsible for caring for seven men. She enters the little house in the middle of the forest she criticizes the fact that the people who live in it are untidy and dirty. She decides to clean up the house even though she doesn’t even know who lives in it. When Snow White is rescued by the dwarfs they make an agreement with her that they will keep her safe if she does the cooking and cleaning for them. By agreeing to this she is put in a position of servitude. A woman is supposed to be responsible for everything in the kitchen while the man, the dwarfs serving as the man in the story, is the protector and is the one who will be right in the end. Domestic drudgery doesn’t faze her since she is sure that a handsome owning-class chap will, someday soon, come and save her (Maio, 1998). In one of the first scenes of the movie, Snow White is seen scrubbing the walkway and stairs, and sings a song titled “I’m Wishing” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937). She smiles and sings with the animals during this scene, as the birds and other forest friends, surround her to join in. Snow White gives the impression that cleaning is a pleasant activity as seen below:
Snow White was also seen worrying over the dwarves’ hygiene before allowing them to sit for dinner, making sure that they washed their hands and saying “Oh! Perhaps you have washed? But when? Oh! Recently! Let me see your hands. Let me see your hands!” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937). During this scene, she is comparable to a mother nurturing her child. To further the ‘mothering’ stereotype, female characters are often shown talking and singing to animals, as Snow White can be seen in the examples below. Snow White’s voice is so pure and natural that all of the forest creatures come out to listen to her sing “A Smile and a Song” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937).
Princess Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty* can also be seen singing about her one true love to her animal friends.

![Aurora is seen singing to the animals in the yard (Sleeping Beauty, 1959).](image1)

![Aurora singing “Once Upon a Dream” (Sleeping Beauty, 1959).](image2)

It is important for parents to inform their children of how there has been a shift in gender roles, and emphasize the importance of the fact that Disney is fictional. This awareness has the ability to better the lives of children in preventing self-esteem issues and conquering childhood as independent and original individuals and not as what society pressures them to be (Orenstein, 2006).

Disney Princesses are usually portrayed as simply waiting around until a man comes along to take care of them. As seen in these Disney movies, each heroine needs rescuing by the nearby prince. Cinderella, Snow White, and Aurora all seem incapable of helping themselves. In *Snow White*, the dwarves warn her not to let anyone in the cabin, but Snow White disobeys them. In doing this she disobeyed men, which leads to consequences like being poisoned. This creates the idea that women are distracted and should take men’s advice on all subjects and obey them. In the time this story was written the hidden message was to convey these ideas and roles to women and show them what they need to do. Cinderella is a great example of this as she seems powerless to control her own fate. She is left to stay as a servant for her step-mother and step-sisters for the rest of her life, until she escapes by marriage. Cinderella’s lack of power reveals itself in how she falls in love with the prince after meeting him one time at the
ball. Instead of making her own personal choice, she seems to only have an identity through a relationship with Prince Charming. Similar to Cinderella, Aurora from Sleeping Beauty seems to be obsessed with being a wife, which is seen in her song “Once upon a Dream” (Sleeping Beauty, 1959). Meanwhile, Snow White sings about her future husband in her song “Someday my Prince will come” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). These desires consumed by a future marriage, place these characters in a position of submission and weakness where only a male prince can free them and fulfill their wishful thinking. These females also lack the personal choice in these marital unions. For example in Cinderella, the king rules that his son, the prince, will marry the girl whose foot fits the glass slipper. Similarly, in Sleeping Beauty, the king betroths Aurora at birth to Prince Philip as captured in the scene below:

Removing individual choice from these females highlights how they are defined by male standards and controlled even in major life decisions like marriage.

Disney films teach young girls that dreams can come true. In these Disney movies, the same scenario repeats itself constantly; a young lady who is or becomes a princess waiting for her dream man to rescue her and marry her. This fantasy of marrying the perfect man and living happily ever after sounds appealing, but what's missing is the hard work, determination, and perseverance needed to achieve one's dreams (Bell et al. 1995). A study published in the American Journal of Family Therapy, suggests love at first sight and happily ever after ideas are damaging themes in these Disney films. These images encourage an expectation for
relationships that is unrealistic, as couples do not tend to live happily ever after without effort from both partners (Tanner et al., 2003). In each of these movies there is central prince and princess pairing, and the women are saved in some way by the masculine, strong, independent prince. Disney’s men often claim the spotlight even when they are absent most of the movie and the story being told is not theirs. Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty are all movies titled after their female characters and yet it is the men who are heroes. This brings up another common theme among Disney movies that Princesses are incomplete without a man. They constantly need to be rescued and enter their prince’s life instead of creating their own. The idea of females being incapable to live without having a man in their lives might affect young girls because it emphasizes the idea that women are weak and that they should get married to find true happiness (Do Rozario, 2004). Furthermore, every single princess in Disney ends up marrying the love of her dreams, which is not always applicable in real life. Not all women marry the ones they truly love and not all women end up even getting married. Snow White always longs for her man to find her. When the movie first starts she sings “I’m wishing for the one I love to find me” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937).

During the entire movie, all she does is think about her handsome prince whom she will marry one day. Snow White even says a prayer before bed in which she speaks mostly of marrying the prince. This reflects the stereotype that women live only for the ambition of finding true
love and nothing else. Snow White manages to fall in love while sleeping, and when asked if it was hard to fall in love, she replies, “It was easy” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937). However, in this movie the prince appears only twice, once at the beginning of the movie while singing with Snow White and then again at the end. Cinderella simply has to prove that the glass slipper fits her, in order to marry the prince. The idea that love is easy and requires little work is a common theme among the princess movies.

Another easily noticed characteristic of these three princesses is that they are all beautiful young Caucasian women. All three princesses have flawless ivory skin, doe-eyes, red lips, rosy cheeks, and a perfect figure. Cinderella and Aurora have long flowing blonde hair that always seems to be in place, no matter if they are cleaning or sleeping. Ironically, in *Sleeping Beauty*, the first gift given to baby Aurora is beauty. In *Cinderella*, Lady Tremaine is jealous that Cinderella is more beautiful than her own daughters. The step-sisters are so overcome with jealousy, that they can be seen ripping Cinderella’s first ball gown into shreds, while she is wearing it. In *Snow White*, not only did her beauty save her life on more than one occasion—it was her only defining characteristic. Oddly, her beauty was the cause of her demise in the first place. Queen Grimhilde wants to be the fairest in all the land, but her magic mirror keeps saying that Snow White is the fairest. Out of jealousy over Snow White’s beauty, Grimhilde orders the huntsman to kill Snow White, but because she was so beautiful he had pity on her. The
huntsman allows Snow White to run away not because she was an innocent child princess, but because she was beautiful. His guilt was for witnessing the destruction of something beautiful, not for poisoning an innocent child.

If there is a powerful female figure in the movie, she is almost always evil. Stepmothers are a favorite stereotype in Disney films. Most of the time, stepmothers are depicted as the villain in and are seen as uncaring and jealous. In Snow White, Queen Grimhilde’s motivation to kill Snow White derives from the Queen’s jealousy that Snow White is the fairest in the land. The issue the queen deals with is beauty and the necessity, but consequences of it. She is consumed by beauty, which is a contradiction of what is expected of women. They are expected to look perfect at all times and be refined and beautiful, but if they obsess about it they are seen as crazy or in some cases ugly. The idea of beauty is central to the story because the most beautiful is the one who is the winner, and the queen who is not as beautiful is the loser. In Cinderella, Lady Tremaine, the stepmother in is old, unappealing, and mean, and the step-sisters, Anastasia and Drizella, are unattractive. The step-mother treats Cinderella as a slave and does not allow her to go to the ball because Cinderella was prettier than her own daughters. While Cinderella was forced by her step-mother to clean the house and do the household chores, her step-sisters enjoyed all the privileges. This may cause children to
develop negative feelings, especially towards their step-mothers and step-sisters. In contrast, Cinderella’s father did not play a significant role in Cinderella’s life. She was mostly under the control of her ‘evil’ step-mother. This can adversely affect children by allowing them to think that all step-mothers are evil and mistreat their step-daughters, because the father role is missing. In addition, by showing the differences the step-sisters had with Cinderella, it is possible for children to think that step-sisters share a bad relationship, which is not the case in many occasions. We assume Cinderella’s father, we assume, is so committed to his wife that he allows her to bully his daughter. In Sleeping Beauty, the antagonistic character is Queen Maleficent. While she isn’t a step-mother, she is still considered one of the most sinister Disney villains. This character has greenish-white skin, wears a black two-pointed headdress, and was designed to look like a giant, menacing vampire bat (Hoerrner, 1996). Maleficent is angry that she wasn’t invited to baby Aurora’s christening, so she decides to place a curse on Aurora so that before the sun sets on her sixteenth birthday, Aurora will prick her finger on a spindle of a spinning wheel and die. All of these wicked characters seem to look similar in that they have long narrow faces, pointed noses, and overly arched eyebrows. Each queen also has an unpleasant sounding name, such as Grimhilde, Lady Tremaine, and Maleficent, to go along with their appearance, and typically has a raspy voice.

![Queen Grimhilde (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937).](image1)
![Lady Tremaine with her daughters, Anastasia & Drizella (Cinderella, 1950).](image2)
![Queen Maleficent (Sleeping Beauty, 1959).](image3)
The Future of the Disney Princess

Many Disney all time best-selling movies are outdated, and are set in times when women were seen as domestic, vulnerable, and dependent on men for emotional and financial support. It seems Disney has made an effort to reduce these stereotypes over the years. After analyzing several Disney movies, England et al, found that in earlier films, 86% of princesses' behaviors were feminine – passive, weak and needed to be rescued – while in later movies the number was reduced to 53%. Believing in a fantasy where women don't have a voice and are left waiting for their prince to rescue them is unrealistic in these modern times. We must adopt a 21st century view and adapt to the changing times.

Conclusion

Though it can be noted that Disney has improved the way it portrays gender and gender norms in its recent publications; their older films are still viewed by children. The Disney organization does not create the stereotypes, it simply reflects them. This is why it is important to study gender stereotypes and roles so that children recognize these roles and are able to detach themselves from some of the negative ones. By exposing the negative effects of gender stereotyping, we are empowering our children to break free of society's plans for them and develop their own path in life.

In conclusion, the use of stereotypes in most of the Disney’s animated films leads the public to think in a same way. Very young kids are too influenced by Disney characters: we can see it clearly when it comes to marketing. Almost all the products aimed at children have Disney characters on them. Parents should always be with their kids when they watch animated films in order to clarify some ideas in their heads and keep them away from developing a wrong thought. Media plays a big role in our daily lives.
REFERENCES


Annotated Bibliography-Movies


Cinderella’s mother dies, and her father remarries Lady Tremaine. Cinderella becomes a servant for her stepmother and two step sisters. With the help of a fairy god mother and some mice she turns into a beautiful princess for one night where she goes to the prince’s ball to fall in love with him. Then when the clock turns midnight she has to go and she loses her glass slipper. The king then sends out the Grand Duke to find the owner of the glass slipper. He decides that whoever’s foot fits into the slipper will marry his son Prince Charming. The slipper, of course, only fits Cinderella, and she is whisked away to marry the prince.


The Queen gives birth to a baby princess named Aurora. At birth she is betrothed to Prince Philip. Three Fairy Godmothers gave the infant gifts at her christening. However, Queen Maleficent is upset that she wasn’t invited to the christening, so she set a curse that would make the princess prick her finger on a spindle of a spinning wheel and die. One of the Fairy Godmothers knew of Queen Maleficent’s curse, so her gift to the princess was that the curse wouldn’t be as effective on the princess that she would sleep, instead of dying, for a hundred years until a prince comes and awakes her from her sleep. At the age of 16, the princess gets her finger pricked by the spindle, and falls asleep. Along with the Fairy Godmothers, Prince Philip hears about his beautiful princess sleeping in the castle. When the prince goes into the castle and finds the princess asleep, he kisses her and she awakes. The princess and the prince marry.


A beautiful young girl, Snow White, takes refuge in the forest in the house of seven dwarfs to hide from her stepmother, the wicked Queen Grimhilde. The Queen is jealous because she wants to be known as “the fairest in the land,” and Snow White's beauty surpasses her own according to the mirror on the wall. The Queen orders a huntsman to kill Snow White, but once he sees how beautiful she is, he can’t do it and tells her to run away. She ends up in a cabin in the woods where seven dwarfs live. The dwarfs grow to love their unexpected visitor, who cleans their house and cooks their meals. But one day while the dwarfs are at their diamond mine, the Queen arrives at the cottage disguised as an old peddler woman and persuades Snow White to bite into a poisoned apple. The dwarfs, warned by the forest animals, rush home to chase the witch away, but they are too late to save Snow White from the poisoned apple. They place her in a glass coffin in
the woods and mourn for her. The Prince, who has fallen in love with Snow White, happens by and awakens her from the wicked Queen's deathlike spell with a kiss.

Annotated Bibliography-Scholarly Articles


The contributors in this book treat a range of topics at issue in contemporary cultural studies: the performance of gender, race, and class; the engendered images of science, nature, technology, family, and business. The compilation of voices in From Mouse to Mermaid creates a persuasive cultural critique of Disney's ideology.


This is a study about gender role depictions of the prince and princess characters in Disney movies. Princes and Princes were examined with a focus on their behavioral characteristics and climactic outcomes in the films. Results suggest that the prince and princess characters differ in their portrayal of traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics, these gender role portrayals are complex, and trends towards unrestricted gender roles are not linear over time. Content coding analyses demonstrate that all of the movies portray some stereotypical representations of gender, including the most recent film, The Princess and the Frog. Although both the male and female roles have changed over time in the Disney Princess line, the male characters exhibit more androgyny throughout and less change in their gender role portrayals.


Gender roles are very prominent in Disney films; typically women are portrayed as a princess, queen, or homemaker. A Disney princess is a female heroine that many children look up to as role models. Though usually not princess by birth, these women are praised for their determination, skills, and strong will. Disney has and will continue to use princesses as main characters. In early Disney films the princess was shown through a traditional fairy tale, the damsel-in-distress theme. The heroine needs rescuing by the nearby prince, meeting the standard of early-20th century American ideals. Many Disney fairytales were stories that drew on traditional legends that quickly lost favor when women's right became a serious issue.


This is a study of Disney films and the common themes found amongst the films. To date, no research has examined images of couples and families in a wide sampling of
Disney feature-length animated films. This study was designed to identify themes about couples and families portrayed in 26 Disney animated classics and recently released movies. In general, four overarching themes were identified: (a) family relationships are a strong priority, (b) families are diverse, but the diversity is often simplified, (c) fathers are elevated, while mothers are marginalized, and (d) couple relationships are created by “love at first sight,” are easily maintained, and are often characterized by gender-based power differentials.


This is a study that examined the portrayals of the organizing societal principles of gender, race, age, and sexual orientation across a wide sample of these films. By observing the portrayal of these organizing principles in a sample of 26 full-length animated Disney films, findings indicate that gender, racial, and cultural stereotypes have persisted over time in Disney films. Few examples of positive portrayals emerged, but were increasingly common in later films. Marginalized groups were portrayed negatively, rarely, or not at all. The purpose of this study was to analyze popular animated Disney films according to major organizing principles of society: gender, race, age, and sexual orientation. Children learn about these societal constructions from many sources, but media are powerful sources of learning. Given Disney’s dominant position in children’s media, it is important to examine the messages contained in these films related to gender, race, age, and sexual orientation.