

Courtney Kay
 Rhetoric and Civil Life
 Paradigm Shift Essay

Lessons of Disney Animated Features

“Our greatest natural resource is the minds of our children”- Walt Disney. If our children’s minds are great resources, it sure matters what we are teaching them. Disney movies all have themes, and lessons, that children idolize. Kids dress up as characters, act out films, and sing corresponding songs. But, Disney movies in the past are known to be historically incorrect, and stereotypical. Kids rave over the characters, and idolize them but, are they really good lessons to be learning from? While no damage has come out of watching old Disney movies- and while they provide entertainment and joy- good can definitely come out of positive themes and lessons that Disney projects to kids watching them. It is interesting to see how in different periods of time, these lessons have changed to fit society. The Shift between the first animated film, *Snow White*, to the latest upcoming film, *Moana*, shows how much the lessons being taught from these movies have changed over the past 79 years.

The first period starts with *Snow White*- the first feature. It a period of creativity, fun, and talking animals. It goes from 1937 (*Snow White*) to (1966) when Walt was diagnosed with lung cancer, and sadly passed away. Up to that point, we can see a trend of morals, lessons, and feelings that Disney and his producers were trying to give to the viewers. In his book, *Demystifying Disney*, Pallant called this time the “‘Classic Disney Period’ ...the Disney-Formalist ideology prioritized artistic sophistication, ‘realism’ in characters and contexts, and, above all, believability”. Overall, in the midst of the Great Depression, Disney wanted to

create an escapist fantasy land, with aspirational characters. This was shown in *Snow White*, and in the uplifting, light-hearted, movies of this time (Sage Publications). Once Walt and his company saw how successful *Snow White* was, he stated, “We have to keep those things rolling out. If we don't get a feature out every so often, we are going to go broke. They must come out soon” (Pallant, 34). And they did, with only a significant break between the releases of *Bambi* (1942), and *Cinderella* (1950). But throughout this period, there was a general feeling of happiness and joy that was to be given off from these movies. “The ‘animistic’ forms the roots of the sensuous; in regressing to primitivism the viewer regresses to simplified gratification” (Harrington, 69). Using talking animals in *Dumbo* (1941), *Bambi* (1942), *The Lady and the Tramp* (1955), and *101 Dalmations* (1961), it taught viewers and kids about creativity, and was deemed ‘silly’ by a lot of kids- providing happiness.

Most of these movies were focused either around the end value of love (*Cinderella* (1950), *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)) or pure adventure (*Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *The Sword and the Stone* (1964)). But, while entertaining films, the lessons and themes were not the best for kids to be idolizing. In *Snow White*, it taught that “In the state of innocence a person will attribute to others all that happens to them and take no responsibility themselves” (Flynn). And in *Alice in Wonderland*, and in *Peter Pan* (1953), we see female characters denied power and control over situations that they are in, while the male dominates their decisions and actions. What these movies give off are standards and stereotypes that we should not be teachings kids to follow. But, Disney’s success continued to grow and thrive until his sudden diagnosis and passing due to lung cancer.

The second period was one of confusion and darkness. From 1966 when Walt Disney died, to 1981, there were only three animated features released: *The Jungle Book* (1967), *Robin Hood* (1973), and *The Fox and the Hound* (1981). “With Walt gone, and many of his veteran animators dropping out of the picture, there was a time in the late sixties and early seventies that it seemed that Disney animation was going to die -Leonard Maltin” (Pallant, 72). These films have a trend; dark, with not as cheerful and happy vibes as the past films. *The Fox and The Hound* was rated the most forgotten Disney movie according to thetoppens.com. The company went through a period of leadership shifts, leading to cartoon malfunctions such as doubling characters and scenes in movies. Overall, Disney was disorganized, and confused.

“This feeling of uncertainty and disaffection, which was shared by many of the young animators at Disney, manifested itself during the production of *The Fox and the Hound*” (Pallant, 75).

Many feel that the classic “Disney feeling” that was provided in the successful past movies, was not present in these films. “...the *Fox and the Hound* doesn't conclude with a happy Disneyfied ending...” (Joseph). None gave the original ‘escape’, or warm feeling that features before Walt Disney died, did. But soon, the company would turn around again.

The next two periods somewhat overlap into two periods/categories. The first, is years 1984 to 1999 where some of the greatest classics were created. Disney regained its popularity and happy, cheerful feeling it was known for with *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Aladdin* (1992), *The Lion King* (1994), *Pocahontas* (1995), and *Mulan* (1998). Pallant talks about this period: “...referred to as the Disney Renaissance, reflect a phase of aesthetic and industrial growth at the studio” (Pallant, 89) Though these movies embraced the cheerful, happily ever after aspect of the

first Disney movies, features in this period were the most historically incorrect, and stereotypically defined movies Disney had created. “While the audience watching *Aladdin* sees Jafar, cultural critics see Saddam Hussein... some, too, may see *Mulan* as a story about a communist girl... and many see Belle in *Beauty in the Beast* as a victim of oppressive masculinities and a patriarchal culture” (Harrington 89). With main themes of love, but unrealistic historical periods and questionable societal values, the lessons and themes from these movies were not good role models for kids watching. In *Pocahontas*, racist assumptions and comments are made against Native Americans, and gender role stereotypes are portrayed (Joseph). Pallant explains that “The typical Disney story utilises fairytales as source material but then forces the original folk story to conform to these mainstream storytelling conventions” (Pallant, 72). He also wanted his movies and characters to inhibit a balance of sensuality and logic (Pallant, 83, “Disney Formalism”). This all meant, that Disney characters would inherently be a direct representation of society’s values, therefore projecting those values into the lessons and themes of their movies. While the overdramatized theme of love was portrayed in many movies of this era (*Aladdin*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Pocahontas*, and *Mulan*), soon, a different type of Disney feature arose.

When Pixar and Disney joined forces for their first movie, *Toy Story*, in 1995, it marked a significant turn. The lessons and themes in these movies created from there on, would be different than in the past. *Toy Story* (1995), (while there is a love aspect), mostly focuses on the theme of friendship. And as more and more Disney/Pixar movies come out, the themes and lessons vary greatly. But, at the same time, Disney movies are taking a turn. With *101*

Dalmatians (1996), it teaches how to stand up to bullies, and *Mulan* features a woman as a soldier, and proving that women can do the same things as men- which is a huge turning point. *Lilo and Stitch (2002)*, teaches about family, and so does *The Incredibles (2004)*. *WALL-E (2008)* and *UP (2007)* are two more examples of movies with real life, educational themes; “Disney consistently pushing the envelope in its features (engaging, for example, with eco-politics in *WALL-E (2008)* and tackling themes such as miscarriage, bereavement and agism in a heavy-hitting opening ten minutes in *UP*” (Pallant, 143). *The Princess and the Frog (2009)* being an accurate representation of the New Orleans culture, and the main character being African American, was another huge milestone for Disney. With the joining of these companies, and a turn of the 21st century, Disney was not only producing movies. Disney was giving kids and families lessons to learn from, and teaching morals to live by. The stories they were telling we’re stories that could, and should be looked up to by little kids. And surely, they were.

The last era of Disney movies is the one we are living in now. The “Frozen Era”. Since *Frozen (2013)*, Disney has gotten notable press on their changes to their lessons and morals in movies. It is encouraging them to continue on the path of re formatting the content that they provide to the children watching. Though called the “Frozen Era”, because that film was the most popular, the era started with the movie *Brave (2012)*. In the movie, Merida is a tomboy-like character, who sets off on adventure to save her Mother. The fact that a Princess was going to be the hero in this story, was a huge change. It continued with *Frozen: Frozen’s* changes were very dominant, and were not hard to miss. The end goal of the plot was to find her sister. The bond between the two sisters showed something so powerful, that Disney had never emphasized

before. The two girls also demonstrated strikingly new and progressive qualities: “All of these discourses emphasize on Anna’s masculine qualities, which are traditionally shown by the hero in Disney movies... In this way, *Frozen* seems incongruent with the prediction that male role will be more masculine while female role will be more feminine in Disney princess movie” (Wu). The newest and upcoming Disney movie, *Moana*, is about a teenage girl who sets off on an adventure to fulfill a quest from her ancestors. In the movie, they are also making her character more realistic looking. This alone, will be monumental in little kids as they look up to her as a new Disney character. The Directors John Musker and Ron Clements stated, “*Moana* will not come from a place of western interest in Polynesian culture, but heavy research into the history of various island cultures” (McFarland). They are not only making sure that their historical background is correct and informative, but they the plotline is not focused on love- it is focused on the determination of a girl who wants to accomplish something. These new breakthroughs of breaking stereotypes and creating new themes and morals is huge to the Disney company. It is giving kids more reasons to adore and look up to these characters, while teaching them valuable, life lessons at the same time.

Disney animated films have provided entertainment and joy to people of all ages since they first began. But, the lessons and themes have not always provided good role models for children to look up to. With constant stereotypes, wrong historical context, and unrealistic expectations of love, these movies were not fulfilling the great potential that could be teaching new generations real life lessons. Disney features went through phases, of the themes and lessons they provided, until they got to where they are at right now. Today, recent films have broken

social standards, and are teaching kids to stand up for what they believe in, and be who they are.

They are breaking boundaries, giving kids good heroes to look up to, and teaching good lessons.

Works Cited

- Flynn, Stephan. "Analysis of Snow White And The Seven Dwarves." *Analysis of Snow White And The Seven Dwarves*. The Jung Page, 27 Oct. 2013. Web. 02 Nov. 2016.
<<http://www.cgijungpage.org/learn/articles/analytical-psychology/677-analysis-of-snow-white-and-the-seven-dwarves>>.
- Harrington, Sean. *The Disney Fetish*. Herts, U.K.: John Libbey, 2014. Print.
- Joseph, Ben. "Disney Movies and Racism." *Disney Movies and Racism*. PBWorks, 2009. Web. 02 Nov. 2016. <<http://disneyandmovies.pbworks.com/w/page/17905681/Criticism>>.
- Joseph, Ben. "Disney Movies and Racism: Pocahontas." *Disney Movies and Racism*. PBWorks, 2009. Web. 01 Nov. 2016.
<<http://disneyandmovies.pbworks.com/w/page/17905676/1%20Pocahontas>>.
- "List of Disney Feature Films." *Fandom*. The Disney Wiki, n.d. Web. 02 Nov. 2016.
<http://disney.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_Disney_feature_films>.
- McFarland, K. M. "Disney's Moana Is Here To Make You Forget All About Lava." *Wired.com*. Conde Nast Digital, 22 July 2016. Web. 02 Nov. 2016.
<<https://www.wired.com/2016/07/disney-moana-comic-con/>>.
- Pallant, Chris. *Demystifying Disney: A History of Disney Feature Animation*. New York: Continuum, 2011. Print.
- Pallant, Chris. "Disney-Formalism: Rethinking 'Classic Disney' (2010)." *Academia.edu*. Sage Publications, 20 Dec. 2010. Web. 01 Nov. 2016.
<http://www.academia.edu/405056/Disney-Formalism_Rethinking_Classic_Disney>.

Wu, Demi. "Critical Analysis of Frozen." *Academia.edu*. Academia, 2016. Web. 02 Nov. 2016.

<http://www.academia.edu/9502786/Critical_Analysis_of_Frozen>.

Works Cited

