

Amanda Yerby, Samantha Baron, Youjin Lee

History of Animation

Assignment 1, Part 4

Website Collaborative Content

Gender roles in Disney Animation

I. Introduction

[a. Definition of Gender Roles](#)

Gender roles are a perceived set of behavioral norms usually associated with males and females in a given social group or system. They allow individuals to refer to certain attitudes or behaviors that class a person's stereotypical identity. This concrete behavior of individuals is both a socially enforced rule and value, as well as being individuals disposition, genetic, unconscious, or conscious. Gender roles vary among different societies and cultures, though creativity or time may cause these rules and values to change. Gender roles are often conditioned by household structure, access to resources, specific impacts of the economy, and other local relevant factors (Thompson).

[b. How certain characters are portrayed in animation](#)

Today many of the aspects such as women being the weaker sex and set roles for each denomination haven't changed as much as you would think. Many women have gone into jobs once thought to be male oriented, but make only a fraction of what their male counterparts do. Looking at male and female characters in animations, one can see how those two genders are portrayed differently in terms of their roles. Male characters have been more prominent and portrayed as more likely to have a recognizable job, more independent, assertive, intelligent, athletic, important, competent, technical, confident, responsible, and stronger than female characters. For example, Tarzan was adopted by a tribe of the strongest mammals on earth, and spent his formative years trying to imitate them. The entire film displayed his ripped musculature, and Tarzan killed a vicious saber-toothed leopard with only a pointy stick. On the other hand, female characters have been portrayed as weaker, more controlled by others, emotional, warmer, tentative, romantic, affectionate, sensitive, frailer, passive, complaining, domestic, stereotypical,

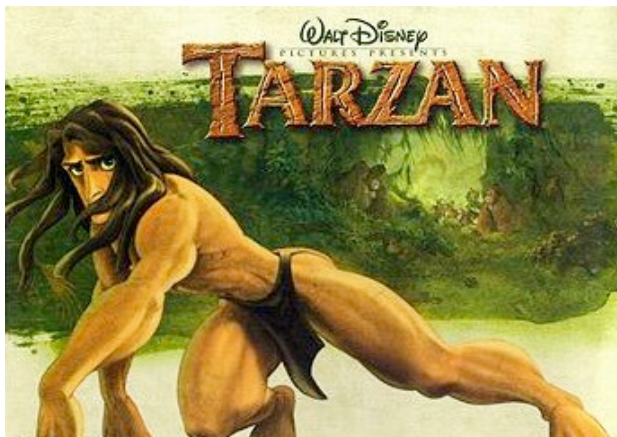
and troublesome than male characters. For example, Cruella Deville (101 Dalmatians), Ursula (The little Mermaid) and the wicked Queen (Snow White and the seven dwarfs) are classical examples of middle-aged villains. They have been called Disney's femme fatales (powerful woman defined by their sexuality). Additionally, in Lion King, when Simba's father (the king) is killed, he runs away and Scar takes over. The lionesses are shown to be very weak and they have to wait for Simba to return and save them. This shows that the lionesses can't do anything themselves and have to depend on the lions for their freedom, their future.



Lion King



101 Dalmatians



Tarzan



Snow White

[c. Intro to Disney animation](#)

The Disney Studios, with the help of their animators came up with a series of shorts, which included familiar characters such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy in the 1930's. As the animation progressed, Disney decided he wanted to try and make the first feature length animated film, "Snow White and The Seven Dwarves." With the success of "Snow White," (1937) Disney went on to create other feature length films which have included classics such as Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella to name a few. However, when looking at the history of Disney movies there is a trend in the roles that female characters play within the movies. When analyzing Disney movies through a timeline it is easy to see how these roles progressed through time.

Please visit <http://www.disneyanimation.com/aboutus/history.html> for a complete timeline of Disney movies.

Snow White and The Seven Dwarves is the first animated feature length film produced by Disney. In this movie, Snow White is very domestic, and is relying on a prince to come save her. The same trend is found in Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty as well. They are all dependent on a Prince. When looking further down the timeline and analyzing movies such Aladdin, Pocahontas, and Mulan, each princess in these movies are more independent. For example, in Aladdin, Princess Jasmine does not wish to rely on a Prince, and is more independent and free-spirited, the same with Pocahontas and Mulan.

Works Cited

- Aladdin. Dir. Ron Clements, John Musker." Disney : 1992, Film.
Cinderella. Dir. Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson. Disney: 1950, Film.
"History." Walt Disney Animation Studios. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Jun 2010.
<<http://www.disneyanimation.com/aboutus/history.html>>.
Mulan. Dir. Tony Bancroft, Barry Cook. Disney: 1998, Film.
Pocahontas. Dir. Mike Gabriel, Eric Goldberg. Disney: 1995, Film
Sleeping Beauty. Dir, Clyde Geronimi. Disney: 1957, Film.
Snow White and The Seven Dwarves. Whilhem Grimm, Jacob Grimm, Disney: 1937, Film

II. Disney and Gender Roles

a. The role of princesses - most Disney movies portray the princesses as souls who need to be "rescued" - why?

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, for example Ariel in the Little Mermaid, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Jasmine in Aladdin, and Mulan.

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. Cinderella is a great example of this; she is left to stay in the same enforced servitude for the rest of her life until she escapes by marriage. Cinderella and many others were tales that drew on traditional legends that quickly lost favor when women right became a serious issue. Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty were all incapable of helping themselves and getting out of their own troubles.

As feminism rose in America there was a shift in type of princess Disney portrayed. In the 1980's Disney reinvented their princesses with the release of The Little Mermaid. Though Ariel ends up marrying her true love, she is rebellious and ambitious, finding success herself. This change in the princess's role, lead Disney and their animation department to realize Disney princesses could do anything. By the time Pocahontas came out, she was able to stand up for herself, but herself in risk of a stranger. Mulan was able to fight off an entire invading Hun army and save her country. These new Disney princesses were a different kind of role model for young girls.

Disney uses princess (female heroines) more often than male heroes for numerous reasons. According to them it is easier for men to identify with a female power figure than a male. It allows powerful females to remain more in contact with their weaknesses and insecurities, where typical male heroes are often portrayed as hard and consistently strong. Disney princess provides a universal role model for viewers of both sexes, whereas a Disney prince may be more difficult to make accessible to a wide audience, according to Dr. Richard Sherman of Miami University.

b. Male characters in Disney movies - Very masculine, "the rescuer"

Disney movies have unquestionably displayed men and women in stereotypical roles and in stereotypical body forms. Some critics would suggest that this is the result of hidden motives, while in reality it is only a side effect of common public norms and the very nature of animation. Disney movies could be seen as a very sexist influence on children only starting to form their views of the world. However, when considered with the society that created them, Disney movies fall in line with the sexual biases that exist in society.

It seems that the role model for any leading character is a father figure whether the main character is male or female. Most of the cases when it is a male role model, he's either a King or an important figure. For example, let's look at the prince in *Snow White*. He rides a horse. He even gives the Snow white back a life by giving her a single kiss. This shows how almighty a male character is portrayed in the Disney animation. There is another animation that portrays a male character as important and even superior.

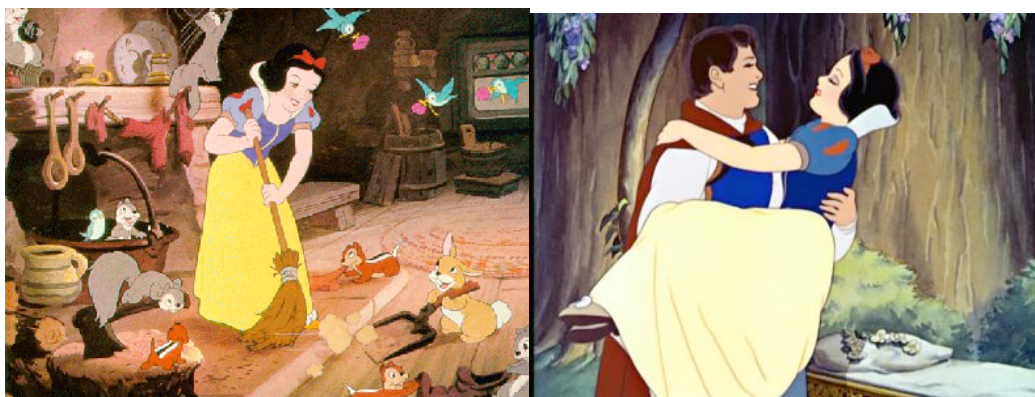
In 'Aladdin,' Aladdin survives with his wits, agility and street smart. Aladdin is even portrayed as fearless man. He fights a gigantic snake even with only a small sword and dozens of bad guys in animation. He is also showing masculinity by wearing a vest revealing most of his upper torso, including his six pecs. As one can see in those animations, male characters have been portrayed as masculine and even superior in Disney animations.



c. Elaboration the Female Role in Disney Movies, and Another look.

Kathi Maio , a Boston Journalist, wrote an article called, "Disney Dolls" on Disney gender roles for the online Magazine, New Internationalist.

Maio takes a deeper look into films we've already been discussing. It is important to take a look at *Snow White*, being the first full-length animated film Disney produced. It helps lay out a theme for later movies, and the roles females will play in them. For example, Maio discusses the fact that Snow White is a "young, virginal, and pretty, sweet natured and obedient." She also explains that domestic work does not faze her since she knows her prince will come to her rescue. Maio argues that this is the making of a typical Disney movie, the young women portrayed in a majority of Disney films are happy homemakers, and wait for a man to give them a reason worth living (1).



While most of the young women in Disney movies are "happy homemakers" she also touches on the point that most of the older women in Disney movies, such as the Stepmother in *Snow White*, or Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, are portrayed as evil characters (1).



Maio does however also recognize that throughout the years, Disney Princesses have matured in their independence. Many still rely on men to rescue them as there is usually a romance of some sort in the film, but many of the female characters, such as Pocahontas and Mulan have found a new independence where relying on a “male rescuer” is not as essential as before.



For another look into Disney Gender Roles and Princesses, please look at an article written by Cassie Schmidt for “The Daily Campus.” She looks at how many of these princesses are not only okay with “home-maker” role, but also the “love at first sight” role. She argues that before calling these young princesses role models, one should take another look. You can read her article here:

<http://www.dailycampus.com/commentary/disney-princesses-are-not-the-role-models-they-appear-to-be-1.1080977>

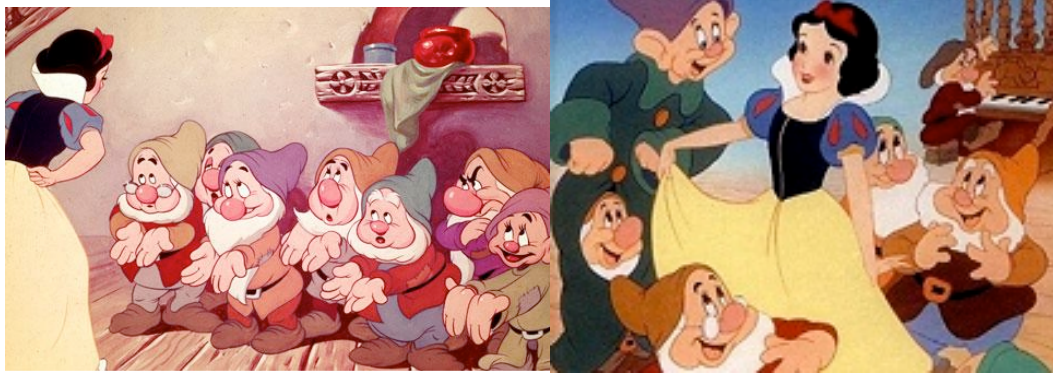
III. Concentrate on Specific Films

Female Disney heroines are traditionally placed in one of three positions: that of an idealized teenage heroine, wicked middle-aged beauty or nurturing post-menopausal woman. These are the main stereotypes.

a. snow white - an example of teenage heroines

Snow white takes on the mother role in the film, we see her doing domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and taking care of the seven dwarfs. She does this

all while smiling and singing or humming along. Snow White does all these things without complaining at all. It conveys what “proper” gender roles of the time were, being released in 1937.



b. *The Little Mermaid* - Ariel : more independent than older princesses

In “*The Little Mermaid*,” Ariel, the mermaid, exemplified the stereotypical passive female role. At the first glimpse, it seems that Disney did not pay much attention to the Women's Movement. For example, Ariel is the same as the earlier Disney heroines, except that she is sexy and wears a bikini made from shells. Also, everything she is interested seems to be all about getting her lover, the prince. As shown in the animation, Ariel seems to be willing to do anything in order to make the prince fall in love with her. She even gives up her voice so that she can have legs, which can make her look better in front of the prince. Even though the animation has happy endings, and Ariel gets her voice back and keeps her lover, she has to leave behind her home, family, and friends.

This shows that she, a female character, gives up everything for her love. This ends up with happy endings. However, Ariel who gives up everything including her family and career just for her romance would have somewhat negative influence on young girls who have to study and think about their careers in the future.



Works Cited

<http://www.dailycampus.com/commentary/disney-princesses-are-not-the-role-models-they-appear-to-be-1.1080977>

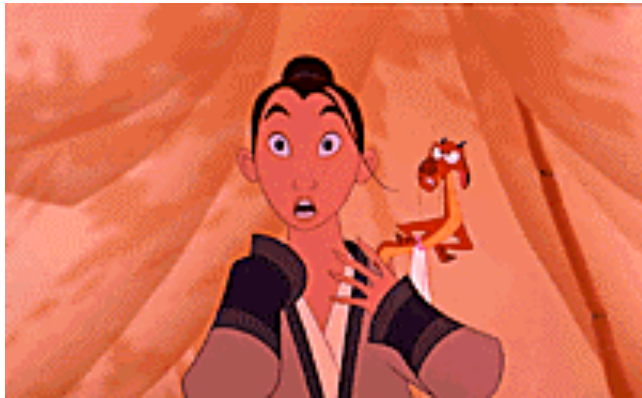
c. Mulan

After spending a lot of time on how Disney princesses lack independence, it is important to look at how history has brought upon the more independent Disney female character, and what not a better way than to look at one of their most independent character – Mulan.

Mulan is a more contemporary character in Disney animation and is based on a true story. It is said best when she is described as braver, more independent, and less focused on finding a husband than other female Disney characters.(Disney Archives) Unlike some of the previous animated films, Mulan transforms herself into a man in order to enter the army in her ailing father's place. She cuts her hair and dresses as a man and through discipline and determination is able to become one of the best soldiers in the army. Mulan did not wait for a man to come to her rescue, but instead, became the rescuer herself.

For another view of a more modern Disney Princess please check out Andy Klein's article, "Disney's Mulan: A More Modern Heroine," written for Animation World Magazine in 1998.

<<http://www.awn.com/mag/issue3.4/3.4pages/3.4kleinmulannotmp.html>>.



Works Cited

Mulan. Dir. Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook. Perf. Ming-Na, Lea Salonga, and Eddie Murphy. Walt Disney Home Video, 1998.

Klein, Andy. "Disney's *Mulan*: A More Modern Heroine." *Animation World Magazine* July 1998: n. pag. Web. 10 Jun 2010.

<<http://www.awn.com/mag/issue3.4/3.4pages/3.4kleinmulannotmp.html>>.

Mulan. Dir. Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook. Perf. Ming-Na, Lea Salonga, and Eddie Murphy. Walt Disney Home Video, 1998.

d. Pocahontas

In *Pocahontas*, Pocahontas is almost invariably being raised by a single father with no sign or mention of a mother or mother figure, ever. The heroine's motherless life serves to accentuate her own feminine virtues and independence, since her father is invariably domineering, feeble, and/or ridiculous. Also, there is no "competing" feminine figure to suggest that the heroine needs any support or guidance. The female character, Pocahontas, shows that her potential as a leader is complicated by her position on the margins of tribal life. When she meets and falls in love with John Smith in the forest, she is forced to keep the encounter secret, giving her pleas that the white men can be reasoned with little weight.

Her secrecy indirectly causes the death of Kocoum at the hands of one of Smith's friends, thus leading her tribe and the English to the brink of war. Her courageous act of

shielding Smith from her father's club with her body, however, is an act of self-sacrifice, and she does it knowing she risks further alienation from her tribe. Pocahontas thus serves as an example of a female character with a more important role in Disney movies.



Works Cited

Pocahontas. Dir. Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg. Perf. Irene Bedard, Judy Kuhn, and Mel Gibson. Walt Disney Home Video, 1995.

The way Disney's animated movies represent women, race and other cultures has changed as you can see in the above. In the Disney's early age animations, female characters with minor or even inferior roles didn't really give a good message to young girls today, in the 21st century. However, as gender roles have changed, the female characters in Disney animations have also changed with gaining more importance in their roles. I, as a woman, hope this change can have positive effect on young girls of today's society.