

# Feminist Outlooks at Disney Princess's

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This research paper is designed to look into gender identity and gender roles through Disney movies. In order to do this, Disney princesses are being researched through four main Disney movies that have a quintessential Disney princess. The research is designed to look at how media exposure affects gender, in particular young girls. It is done in order to see how identity is transformed through long term ideals and virtues set forth from the animated films and from the standard viewpoints of feminists. There is tension between the Disney Corporation and feminists since the first Disney princess movie in 1937. This study is going to correlate the thoughts of the Disney Corporation and the women in the feminists' movements since the first movie. This information affects how parents choose what their children will watch. With information on both sides of this background conflict and knowledge on how children remember the media they watch. It helps parents realize the messages that movies can transmit and let's them decide how often they will influence their children by media. Disney is one of the largest media companies in the world. They allow girls to have fairy-tales. They are simply called fairy-tales for the fact that they are something you can dream of and hope for. Representations of women in Disney films are due partly to the fact that Walt Disney's personal feelings about family life shaped the Disney Company, and partly to the fact that his attitudes mirrored the patriarchal cultural beliefs of the 1940's about what roles women should play in society (O'Brien, 1996).

By looking at the Disney viewpoints through the movies they make and the active feminist responses, the research should find how the gender perceptions have been changing over

time. The content is to identify the structure of hierarchical needs each side possesses through a serpentine. A serpentine looks at the logic of interaction between both of the parties and flips back and forth at the various viewpoints each hold. The logic of interaction starts a series of transactions which influence the next transaction in a row and so forth. The transaction will take on a life of its own through the hierarchical needs and this will be shown through the serpentine. This interaction between the two parties can be seen as a conflict. A conflict is two or more opposing forces that have incompatible goals, or needs. They do not reach a common understanding because of internal or external forces that cannot be shared.

The natures of conflict through the Walt Disney Production films are the ideals that they show through their female protagonists. Walt Disney has set forth standards for girls on how to grow up into proper women in order to find their prince. It is assumed from the films that women are supposed to be beautiful, acquiescent, skinny, and perform all the duties of a housewife. They do not hold jobs of their own and will not disobey direct orders. Feminists believe that women need to have more independence shown through the films. They want the Disney films to show that women can take care of themselves, have jobs and be leaders. Currently the Disney films show a male dominated outlook and they want it to be transformed into complete equality. Feminists have regarded Disney movies as an unhealthy outlook for young children especially girls to watch for the physical attributes they suggest along with the values supporting male dominance. At certain times women push too hard for a full feminist outlook in a movie.

RQ1: How do the dynamics of the movies produced by the Walt Disney Company affect feminist viewpoints?

RQ2: How do the heroines in the Disney Princess films influence gender ideologies and roles over time?

If the Walt Disney Company releases a princess movie, then the feminists will reject the film and make sure viewers know what is politically incorrect with the film. When the feminists reject the Disney princess film, then Walt Disney Company re-evaluates and tries to please them with their next princess film.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Impact of Media:**

When looking at Disney Princess films you have to first look at the media that it is viewed through. When you look at television and films you have to consider the impact it has on the viewers. According to Lin (2001), once children own videos, they watch them repeatedly and with the same frequency as television. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation Report (1999), children watch an average of 2.5 to 3 hours of television per day, or nearly 20 hours per week. Preschool children spend more time watching videos than do adolescents (Bryant, 2001; Mares, 1998). If you look at a constructivist model, children are seen as active agents, eager learners, who actively construct the social world around them and their place in it. Many developmental psychologists have come to view the child as active rather than passive, involved

in appropriating information from his/her environment to use in organizing and constructing his/her own interpretations of the world (Corsaro, 1997).

Social learning theory, and imitation of models is the most important element in how children learn gender appropriate behavior (Papalia, Gross, & Feldman, 2003). And in light of the extensive literature revealing social modeling as a powerful influence of children's concepts and behavior it would seem important to closely examine media produced for the use of children, especially regarding Disney films.

Many people agree that mass media is incredibly influential as a teacher of social norms, specifically to young people (Wynns & Rosenfeld 91). The media has been described by Wynns and Rosenfeld (91) as holding a powerful role in forming the attitudes, values and behaviors of its viewers. Young people could be persuaded to think a certain way from the things they watch on the television. The representations of race and gender within the media affect the viewers whether through stereotypes or ideals to live up too. This is because the media is seen to play a significant role in offering a socializing influence on the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of its audience (Gunter 21).

In addition, the mass media is a powerful resource through which viewers develop their identity and come to understand the role that gender and race plays in the real world (Morawitz & Mastro 132). "Past research additionally indicates that watching televised gender portrayals has an effect on individuals' real-world gender-based attitudes, beliefs and behaviors", then it is easy to say that films also are able to transmit attitudes and beliefs. (Morawitz & Mastro 131). These are the attitudes and beliefs that children watching the Disney princess films would take from watching the films. According to Orenstein's article, some psychologists say that until

permanency sets in kids embrace whatever stereotypes our culture presents, whether it's dressing up as a princess or as a cowboy. Since it has been researched that mass media influences viewers and that children are active learners, we can assume they are effected by media in their perceptions of the world.

The association between gender based attitudes and beliefs are related to what is being shown on the television. Even though there have been many changes over the years about what is considered appropriate societal roles for men and women, this change is not reflected in contemporary television (Gunter 13). Women are seen as domestic, focused mainly on family and personal relationships; they are considered highly emotional individuals, less competent and dependent on their male counterparts for emotional and financial support (Gunter 15-16). Yet, even if this is not true to reality it is still shown on our televisions for impressionable youth to see and to decide the impact it will have on them.

## **DISNEY**

Disney is one of the largest media corporations in the world getting 38 billion in revenue for 2010. Walt Disney started the Walt Disney Company in 1923 and the first princess movie was Snow White and the Seven Dwarves which was made in 1937. Disney developed a formulaic approach to the production of content: Basic elements in its formula: good prevailing over evil, emotional, catchy songs, cute animal sidekicks for comic relief, young romance, funny in-jokes. (Chan 231) as stated in Cheung (2005). Good prevailing over evil usually occurs with an older woman who is jealous of the young princess. All of the princess movies are turned into a musical with the princess having a beautiful sing along voice and the cute sidekick animals are

always around helping save the day. The young romance helps fulfill the ideal of a “Happily Ever After” life that includes the princess and her prince, and the life that they are about to embark on together.

“Disney animated films contain strong messages about the importance of family relationships. Family members were often shown making sacrifice for one another, and putting their families’ well being before their own.” (Tanner, 367) Disney is very successful in showing how much family and good friends should mean. Even though there is always someone that is evil towards the protagonist, they always have a steady support system of people that love and care for them. These family and friends are the main supporters of the princess’s and will help them overcome their troubles, or help save their lives in any way possible.

The Disney narrative of femininity is constructed and continually reconstructed out of “a contradictory mix of forces” from the dominant (producer) and the subordinate (mass audiences) as a product that “marked by both ‘resistance’ and ‘incorporation’.” (Storey 51). Feminists clearly state how they perceive Disney films and their take on whether the films portray women in the right light. Disney does listen to what they have to say and they make changes within the movies as well as with the future productions they are much more careful.

## **FEMINISM**

Critics have generalized femininity to be equating it with “passivity and victimage” (Bell 112) in all Disney texts foundations for a series of criticisms, in which critics consider changes that seen in the Disney narrative of femininity in recent productions to be *mere* manifest changes. When Disney heroines are portrayed as more assertive over times, as the critics claim,

Disney is only updating its narrative of femininity in response to social changes according to Bell.

Disney princesses the so-called “new” Disney heroines, the critics argue, still fulfill the “same plot and personality requisites” (Bell 112). They see every movie as the same background plot but different extenuating circumstances in each film. Pamela O’Brien thus observes believes that the gender ideology in Disney films has changed very little over the company’s history. While Disney’s animated films have adapted to cultural changes, their continued representation of traditional gender roles indicates that the films do more to reproduce than change existing social structures (156, 179).

Disney films do not show the process of falling in love. For them it is a very instant reaction that means it will be lasting love. Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, and Lund (2010) found that “the idea that love is “easy” and requires no work is most clearly illustrated in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*; Snow White manages to fall in love while sleeping” on her choked apple. *Sleeping Beauty* also manages to wake up and instantly be in love. Her prince awoke her with true loves kiss and then they managed to live happily ever after before even speaking.

Four themes emerge from a study done by Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, and Tanner (2011), three themes emerged related to what it means to be a girl/woman: (a) A woman’s appearance is valued more than her intellect; (b) Women are helpless and in need of protection; (c) Women are domestic and likely to marry. Women’s appearance is valued more than their intellect. “In *Dwarfs*, the Queen’s motivation to kill Snow White derives from the Queen’s jealousy that Snow White is the fairest in the land. In *Sleeping*, the first gift given to the baby princess is beauty.” (Towbin et. al, 2011) Belle from *Beauty and the Beast* and Tiana from *Princess and the Frog* are admired for their appearance and intellect, but their intellects are

ridiculed in the films for love of reading or owning a restaurant. Snow White and Sleeping Beauty show how women are helpless and in need of protection, Belle and Tiana are independent but also show a need for protection. Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Belle are all domestic and show a desire for marriage. None of these three themes are conducive to the atmosphere of playing princess that little girls would be playing and imitating.

The first wave of feminism hit during Snow White (1937), and Sleeping Beauty (1959). This first wave of feminism that occurred during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was aimed at women's suffrage and receiving the right to vote. These women were moderate and conservative, they did not plan on making a stir in equality of the home setting. They mainly wanted to be able to vote since they had been able to help with World War I efforts and some already had jobs because of it. These women were very much still housewives and were the prototypical model of what Snow White and Sleeping Beauty would be if the princess movies were reality.

After the 1980's, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the second wave of the Disney productions is marked by a change in the depiction of gender which addressed the transformation of women's roles in post-WWII Western world. They shift from simple stories of passive, young virgins in conflict with evil, mature women to more complex narratives about rebellion, exploration, and danger: (Henke, Umble & Smith 234). These princesses that have rebelled or not just waited for a prince to come like Snow White or Sleeping Beauty have the romantic relationship presented as a "free choice" (White 42), but also as the final fulfillment, for the independent, adventurous heroines like Belle.

Some people believe that "Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* as a victim of oppressive masculinities and a patriarchal culture, while others, a reassuring fairy-tale of love conquering all" (Wells, 123). Belle desires a life of her own choice and acts for herself. It is worth

mentioning that she is the first heroine capable and fond of reading, and the first who no longer falls in love with someone at-the-first-sight. (Henke & Umble 326-327).

Currently we are in the third wave of feminism. And in the “1990s, third-wave feminists rebelled against their sour big sisters, “reclaiming” sexual objectification as a woman’s right — provided, of course, that it was on her own terms, that she was the one choosing to strip or wear a shirt that said “Porn Star” or make out with her best friend at a frat-house bash. They embraced words like “bitch” and “slut” as terms of affection and empowerment. That is, when used by the right people, with the right dash of playful irony.”(Orenstein, 2006) The third wave of feminism also strongly feels as if the Disney princesses promote an unhealthy life style. To them, every princess is anorexic and too thin, they feel that by watching these movies that is the idea that children will idealize to look like and strive for.

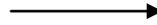
Because of this reason of an unhealthy life style and people to admire, feminists do not want girls to dress up in princess outfits because they do not want to get their daughters to think in such mannerisms of being a princess. However, according to Lyn Mikel Brown, “Playing princess is not the issue, the issue is 25,000 Princess products. When one thing is so dominant, then it’s no longer a choice: it’s a mandate, cannibalizing all other forms of play. There’s the illusion of more choices out there for girls, but if you look around, you’ll see their choices are steadily narrowing.” Brown is seeing the whole outlook on the princess agenda and it involves a takeover of princess memorabilia. There needs to be a common ground with princess products and other children toys.

Peggy Orenstein's article, 'What's Wrong With Cinderella', she mentions that "given its post-9/11 timing, princess mania is a response to a newly dangerous world. "Historically, princess worship has emerged during periods of uncertainty and profound social change," observes Miriam Forman-Brunell, a historian at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Francis Hodgson Burnett's original "Little Princess" was published at a time of rapid urbanization, immigration and poverty; Shirley Temple's film version was a hit during the Great Depression. "The original folk tales themselves," Forman-Brunell says, "spring from medieval and early modern European culture that faced all kinds of economic and demographic and social upheaval, famine, war, disease. Girls play savior during times of economic crisis and instability." That's a heavy burden for little shoulders. Perhaps that's why the magic wand has become an essential part of the princess get-up. In the original stories, even the Disney versions of them, it's not the girl herself who's magic; it's the fairy godmother."(Orenstein, 2006)

## METHODOLOGY: SERPENTINE

### Walt Disney Company

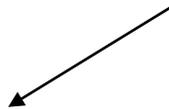
Snow White was made into a movie in 1937 by the Walt Disney Company, after a remake of the popular Grimm Brothers fairytale. Make Snow White into a beautiful princess and turn the movie into a musical for entertainment value.



**Archetype**-First Disney princess movie  
**Culture**-1930's America  
**Community**- Audience is young girls  
**Family**-Aimed to be a wholesome family film  
**Self-Autobiography**-Disney's first movie, they are nervous of the outcome  
**Relationship** -Making young girls want to be princesses  
**Episode** -Trying to fill an empty aspect in the movie industry

### Feminist Response

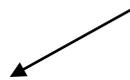
Snow White came out after fighting for women's suffrage and helping with World War I efforts. Feminists feel that Snow White's only goal is for marriage and love, and all she does is wait until her prince finds her. She is the quintessential housewife by caring for the dwarves and only knows how to be pretty and sing.



**Archetype**-Just fought for women's suffrage  
**Culture**-First wave of Feminism  
**Community**- Independent, headstrong women  
**Family**-Currently housewives; want little girls to grow up and get jobs  
**Self-Autobiography**-Just fought for the right to vote, feel like they are taking a step in the wrong direction  
**Relationship** -Want a movie about working, independent women not cookie cutter housewives  
**Episode** -Not happy with the Disney Company

### Walt Disney Company

The Walt Disney Company produces Sleeping Beauty in 1959, following another remake of a Grimm Brothers fairytale. There is not much of an alteration between Snow White and Sleeping Beauty, they both follow the model of what an acquiescent princess should be.



**Archetype**-Second Disney princess movie  
**Culture**-late 1950's/1960's America  
**Community**- Audience is young girls  
**Family**-Aimed to be a wholesome family film  
**Self-Autobiography**-They want this movie to be as successful as Snow White and the Seven Dwarves  
**Relationship** -Making young girls want to be princesses and believe in fairy tales  
**Episode** -Want a repeat of the success of Snow White and continue with the princess theme.

## Feminist Response

Sleeping Beauty was released during the second wave of feminism which lasted 1960 to the 1980's. Women were fighting for inequalities, whether they were legal, sexual, family, workplace, or reproductive rights. The Feminine Mystique in 1963 by Betty Friedan was the book that kicked off the new wave. In 1968 there was a protest to the Miss America Pageant, saying it was an arbitrary form of beauty and what society deemed as beautiful. They were upset that the two most important gifts that the fairies gave Princess Aurora were the gifts of beauty and singing.

### Walt Disney Company

In 1991 the Walt Disney Company made the film Beauty and the Beast and Belle as the protagonist. The Walt Disney Company has seemed to listen to feminist viewpoints and have drastically altered Belle from the previous princesses they have had movies for. They made her an independent woman who was not ready for a husband and loved to read.

**Archetype**-In the midst of fighting for equality  
**Culture**-Second wave of Feminism  
**Community**- Women want to be equal to men  
**Family**-Women are housewives however they are entering the workforce  
**Self-Autobiography**-Fighting for equality and against the idea of waiting around for a man as Sleeping Beauty is portrayed.  
**Relationship** –Want a Disney character that can fend for herself and be equal to the prince.  
**Episode** –Do not want a Prince to have to save Sleeping Beauty, all she does is lie there waiting for him.

**Archetype**- Disney princess movie  
**Culture**-1990's America  
**Community**- Audience is young girls  
**Family**-Aimed to be a wholesome family film  
**Self-Autobiography**-They want to make their princesses go along with what women at that time were striving for which was ambitious  
**Relationship** –Making young girls want to be princesses and believe in fairy tales but now they also want to achieve great things  
**Episode** –Want to influence young girls to dream to become anything they want to when they grow up.

## Feminists

This movie occurred during the third wave of feminism. The women in the third wave were focusing on being successful in the working world and achieving the most they could. The feminists are fond of the fact that Belle is independent, smart, not in a rush for marriage, and enjoys reading. Gaston only wants to marry her for her beauty, which the feminists do not agree with. However, they do not like that even though Belle saved the Beast in the end of the film, the Beast had to save her from the pack of wolves. In the end, the feminists realize that all Belle wanted was love, happiness, and a fairytale ending which was exactly what the feminists did not want.

**Archetype**-Want to prove why they deserve equality  
**Culture**-Third wave of Feminism  
**Community**- Aiming to achieve high status in the working world and be successful  
**Family**-Women are working and taking care of the family.  
**Self-Autobiography**-Fighting for equality and want the Disney films to show a stronger princess role.  
**Relationship** –Want a Disney character that does not have to be saved and can be perfectly happy without needing a fairytale ending.  
**Episode** –Beast and Belle both saved each other at one point in the film, but Belle gave into the patriarchal order that has been established.

## Walt Disney Company

Princess and the Frog made in 2009 is the first African American princess film. Disney wanted to expand their princess movies, they already had Mulan, the Asian princess, which was criticized for stereotyping. But, this new movie was going to show an independent female who was going to own her own restaurant in the time frame of 1920's New Orleans. They wanted to show they have been listening to the feminists are want to promote a more independent woman than previous movies.

**Archetype**- Disney princess movie  
**Culture**-2000's America  
**Community**- Audience is young girls  
**Family**-Aimed to be a wholesome family film  
**Self-Autobiography**-They want Princess Tiana to be independent, a hard worker, and set goals for herself  
**Relationship** –Making young girls want to be princesses and believe in fairy tales but now they also want to fulfill their dreams and what they want to become  
**Episode** –Show girls that they can do anything they can set their minds too, like Princess Tiana by working hard to own her restaurant and a prince.

## Feminists

Originally feminists were really looking forward to seeing *The Princess and the Frog* because it was the first African American Princess. Right before 2009, women have made huge strides such as first woman being elected Speaker of the House, first to win a presidential primary, and first 4 star general. In association with this movie, women were excited about Princess Tiana having a desire to fulfill her dreams, and they like the idea that there is not the patriarchal outlook that most other Disney films have held. They did not agree that 80% of the movie if not more she was a frog. It goes against having an African American Princess if she is going to be a frog. They did not agree that the Walt Disney Company portrayed Tiana as a woman who does not know what is right for her. Mama Odie, a witch doctor sings a song that asks Tiana what she really needs out of life. Which the correct answer would be a partner not a restaurant. They argue that even though Tiana gets all that she wanted in the end with the restaurant, she also gets the Prince. It portrays that you cannot be single and happy, it shows in the film that you need a man to really be happy.



**Archetype**-Want to prove equality and women are striving to achieve everything they can  
**Culture**-Third wave of Feminism  
**Community**- Aiming to achieve high status in the working world and be successful  
**Family**-Women are working and taking care of the family but men are taking more of a role in the housework.  
**Self-Autobiography**-Fighting for equality and want the Disney films to show a stronger princess role without the fairytale ending promoting a partner will make you happy.  
**Relationship** –Want a Disney character that does not need a fairytale ending.  
**Episode** –Tiana is admired for her hard work and independence, however, feminists argue that she should have been able to do it on her own. They do not agree with the issue of needing a man to be happy, and they want to see a film without the fairytale happy ending that is portrayed.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study shows the insight into the Disney mind frame of four of their princess films in accordance to the feminism ideologies that Disney should follow. It started off with Snow White and the Seven Dwarves to Sleeping Beauty. These two movies both have similar aspects to how the princesses are portrayed. They both are what an early 20<sup>th</sup> century housewife in America was supposed to act. The worth as a princess was based off of their appearance and singing abilities. If we look at Belle from Beauty and the Beast we see a change of direction in the princess. The Walt Disney Company have made changes to the princesses according to the changing aspects of women's rights in real life. Belle is independent, hard working, head strong, and enjoys reading and being intellectual. This got a higher approval rating out of the feminists, however Belle was still saved gloriously by the prince. Princess in the Frog, the first African American princess movie, in 2009 was praised for the new personality traits that the princess had. The Walt Disney Company made Tiana an independent woman with dreams of owning her own restaurant and being successful. However, there was also a downfall, this occurred with living happily ever after and the Walt Disney Company showing that you will not be happy without a partner. It seems through this study that no matter what the Walt Disney Company does, it is never good enough for the feminists. In order to make the feminist population happy there has to a successful woman that makes it on her own without a partner. This means that there may not be a happily ever after, seeing as the main part of Disney films are the happy ending with true love.

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