

## THE EVOLVING REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN DISNEY PRINCESSES

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### Abstract

Many young girls across the globe lookup to Disney's princesses. However, the princess images created by Disney carry gender-role stereotypes. Most stories have a stereotypical plot: the girl meets the prince; the prince falls in love with the girl, and the two get married and live happily ever after. The female characters are always portrayed as ordinary women who wish that a rich and handsome man will come and make their lives better. However, the images of Disney princesses have changed in the past eight years. Since 2012, Disney princesses have had more progressive female characters, as seen in *Brave*, *Frozen*, and *Moana* animated features. The main characters are different from past Disney princesses. This paper will try to analyze gender roles in contemporary Disney princesses.

**Keywords: Gender roles, Disney Princesses, representation**

### Introduction

As the world undergoes one change after another, so does the film industry. Disney is one of the most well-known production houses in the world. From Cinderella to Mulan, and Sleeping Beauty to Toy Story, Disney always produces quality entertainment for its audience. Disney princesses remain role models for young girls until this day. A girl with fair skin, thin body, and long hair suggests that 'If you want to be beautiful, you have to look like that.' Moreover, the portrayal of Disney princesses seems to revolve around a girl who dreams of a better life by marrying a charming prince. This suggestion implies that a woman's success and happiness depend on a man.

The term 'damsel in distress' was used to describe past Disney princesses as women who needed men to live (Rodriguez, 2017). The famous Disney Princesses in the past were Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping beauty. Snow White is a story about a beautiful and kind-hearted princess, who ran away from her wicked stepmother. Her mother was jealous because Snow-white was far more beautiful than her as what the magic mirror said. When she arrived at the forest,

she found a small house and knocked on the door, unfortunately, nobody answered her. She decided to enter the house quietly and found out that the house was empty. Long story short Snow White fell asleep and when she woke up, she saw seven dwarfs standing in front of her. During her time in the house, Snow-white prepared the food and cleaned the house. One day, her stepmother knew that she was still alive and decided to kill her by giving the poisonous apple. She died and the dwarfs were so sad, they took Snow White into the coffin and put beautiful flowers around her. One day, a prince came and kissed her, Snow White woke up and free from her stepmother's deathlike spell.

Sleeping Beauty had almost the same plot with Snow White. There was a jealous woman named Maleficent. She wanted to kill Aurora because, again, she was more beautiful than her. Fortunately, Aurora had three little guardian angels, so the death spell from Maleficent did not kill her, but only made her sleep for a thousand year. Similar ending as Snow White, A Prince came and kissed her, and married Aurora.

The plot of Cinderella is also almost the same, the difference was, she did not die, and

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nobody gave her deathlike spells. However, there was always a cruel woman who did not want anyone better than her. Since Cinderella's father died, Cinderella became a maid for her stepmother and stepsisters. She had to prepare the food, clean the house. One day, her family got an invitation to join a kingdom party, but Cinderella's stepmother did not allow Cinderella to join the party. Cinderella was so sad and cried at the garden, and suddenly an old woman came to her and asked what happened to her. The woman was a fairy-godmother, she helped Cinderella to go to the party by providing all she needed to go to the kingdom's party, with one condition that she should come back at midnight. When Cinderella arrived at the palace, all eyes were on her. At the end of the story, she Married a Prince who found her glass-made shoes and lived happily ever after.

However, Disney has made big changes on how they characterize their princesses. *Brave*, *Moana*, and *Frozen* are examples of the progressive image of Disney princesses. Merida is a Scottish princess who desires the freedom to choose who she wants to be. Moana is the daughter of a tribal chief who is destined to bring back the heart of Te-Fiti to save her village. The *Frozen* sisters, Elsa and Anna, are also different from other Disney princesses. Elsa, who has a gift of magic, chooses to stay away from her family because she does not want to harm her family. Compared to previous Disney princesses who were passively waiting for a change, the new princesses seem to actively pursue what they want.

This paper will examine the reason for the changing image of Disney princesses over time. The main reason for the change is the evolution of women's roles in society. This paper is aimed to inform the readers about the reason for the evolution of women's role in Disney princesses.

### **Methodology**

To understand the reasons why Disney

Princesses continue to evolve, this paper will use the Reflection theory. Reflection theory is how media such as books, films, magazines, and commercials reflect the values, norms, and beliefs in the society. There are two types of reflection theory (Harvey, 2012-2020):

- a. Empiricist reflection theory by John Locke. John Locke argued that the ideas in our mind are affected by the external world. One example for this is the definition of love. Love can be defined in a different way depends on the individual experience about love
- b. Dialectic materialist theory by Engels and Lenin argued that the existing world is separated from consciousness, but it cannot be defined in a reverse way. One example for dialectical materialist theory is when we realize that we exist in this world.

Reflection theory can also have relation to Literature to spill in what society can affect literary works. This paper specifically used the Reflection theory of women and film from Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen. The reason why is using reflection theory from Haskell and Rosen because it will dig deeper why the changes happened. Reflection theory suggests that a movie is a reflection of what is happening in the society (White n.d.).

This paper will compare three Disney princesses, Cinderella, Aurora, and Snow White, with the more recent princesses, which are Merida, Elsa, and Moana. The comparison is based on women's roles in society when the movies were released. This paper only covers the stereotype of women's role in 1930s, 1950s, and 2010s and Disney Princesses as have mentioned above. The purpose of this approach is to see the influence the society has on gender roles in movies. Qualitative data will be used in this paper in order to strengthen the arguments.

### **Finding and Discussions**

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Snow White was released in 1937 when women were struggling with the chance to have a job because of the effect of a huge Economic crisis called Great Depression. This crisis affected the any sectors of economics in the United States. According to the balance, the great depression increased the number of jobless people up to 25%, housing prices rose up to 67%, The U.S. International trade by 65%, and deflation reached up to 10% (Amadeo, 2020). This condition also affected the women workers. With only a small chance of having a career, house chores were the only feasible option for women in 1930s (Lewis, 2020). The activities of Snow White in the dwarves' houses, which were cleaning the house and preparing the food, portrayed what the society thought women ought to do.

The women stereotypical jobs have changed in 1950s, when men returned from a great war and took over their job. A lot of women wanted to become a mother or a wife after the men back from war (Stoneham, n.d.). At the same time, ironically, many young girls left the college because they decided to marry, even when they finished their study, they still thought that married is something they needed to do. When Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty were first released, the princesses married princes with the famous tagline of 'happily ever after'. This was the reflection of the phenomenon in the United States called the "M.R.S. Degree" (Women's Role in 1950s, n.d.). M.R.S Degree was the term for women in the 1950s who went to college to find a husband. It is related to the previous explanation above.

Even though they had a big dream, having a husband was far more important for the women in this era.

In the 2010s, the role of women changed drastically. *Forbes* described the 2010s as the era of women (Elting, 2019). Women in the 2010s had more courage to express themselves and choose their own path. They

also believed that women could be powerful and feminine at the same time. Gender equality was a very important movement in 2010. There was a misconception about gender equality. People tend to think that gender parity is women versus men, women do not need men, men are women's enemy. Gender parity is the condition of equality between men and women (UNFPA, 2005). From there, gender equality movement affected the personality of young girls and women. Young girls become more ambitious, have a strong will, and have a better academic performance compared to men (Zaslow, 2009). Merida in *Brave*, Elsa in *Frozen*, and Moana in *Moana* are the representatives of the progressive women's roles. In other words, the evolving representation of women in Disney's princesses was a result of the evolution of women's roles in the society.

The evolving gender roles in Disney's princesses were directly affected by the progression of women's roles in the society. The image of Snow White, for example, was a projection of how women should behave in the 1930s. Although there was a faint possibility of building a career, the society believed that the ideal woman is one who excelled at house chores (Lewis, 2020). As such, the film industry, Disney included, reflected this expectation in their productions.

This inequality then prompted women to demand for equal chance in a better life. Many of the women's movements were aimed at fighting for equal opportunities. In the 1950s, many women pursued higher education with the purpose of finding a husband and getting married. These women were labeled as pursuing a 'M.R.S' degree (Strydom, 2018). Cinderella and Aurora amplified the notion that a marriage was every woman's destiny. The stories' plots suggested that the princesses' main goal was to live happily ever after with smart and financially stable men.

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The 2010s marked a period of progressive mindsets and a world of possibilities for women. Women were more independent and confident in building their careers. The gender equality campaign also became a global campaign, and not just in the United States. In fact, the fifth goal of the United Nations' sustainable development goals is gender equality. It promotes the empowerment of girls and women and equal work opportunities (Goal 5, n.d.)

In response to these changes, Disney reconstructed their female characters. The new princesses are portrayed as strong, bold, and persistent. They are able to stand up for themselves and bring great impact to their surroundings. Merida, Elsa, and Moana represent the current society's perception of women's roles. For one, women are no longer generally perceived as the object of pleasure. Additionally, they can build a good life for themselves, with or without the help of men.

### Conclusions

The evolving representation of women in Disney princesses is affected by the evolution of female gender roles in the society throughout history. With the help of the reflection theory from Molly Haskell and Marjorie Rosen, we can see that what happens in the society influences Disney to change the female gender roles in the society. In the 1930s, although women were allowed to work in certain fields, they were also expected to take care of their households. The idea of a woman who has to take care of the house can be seen from the role of Snow White.

In 1950s, the gender role of women shifted. More women enrolled in higher education, not only to obtain a degree but also to look for compatible men who can provide a better living. Likewise, Cinderella and Aurora, marry princes who are intelligent and financially stable.

In the 2010s, Moana, Merida, and Elsa reflect the society's progressive mindset towards

women - that women can be powerful and influential. From the analysis, we can see how society affected the development of the gender roles in Disney's princesses. It also implies that without gender equality movements, Disney may not have created the princesses in *Brave*, *Moana*, or *Frozen*. As suggested by the reflection theory, a movie is a reflection of what is happening in the society.

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