

Disney's Girls: The Development of Persona from Snow White to Pocahontas

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Abstract

Through his female characters, Walt Disney was able to reflect the development of the general outlook upon women in the Western world over a period of sixty years.

This paper sheds light in how the cartoon characters changed in their reaction to problems and means of solving them from the 30s through to the 90s of the previous century. The main characters will be seen according to the films' dates of production and release.

Introduction

When allowed personal and intellectual freedom, women made significant achievements. This can be traced far back to nuns in the Middle Ages, queens throughout history, female knights, writers, mothers of great writers, poetesses, royal mistresses, sources of inspiration, and many other fields and careers where women proved more than successful.

Although not always fantastic and robust as they became in the twenty-first century, those women still form

the stories that are told today on movies and in real life.

To know something about the development of personality of women from the thirties throughout to the nineties, one can trace the productions of Walt Disney, because he was able through his female characters to reflect the general look towards women in the western world.

This work attempts to shed light upon the most famous female characters that have appeared in different productions by Disney. And

tries to show how each character differ from the other according to her age and the society she lives in. The main characters will be analyzed according to the year of release of the movie itself.

The paper tackles female characters in the stories of *Snow White & the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Pocahontas* to show how each character acts in a different way according to the progress of time.

A good watching of the productions of Walt Disney enables the researcher to trace the change and development of feminine personality in the world of cartoon. These female characters are the heroines of stories known to many generations.

The personalities of Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, The Little Mermaid and Pocahontas, present a good picture of women in different times. They give a realistic portrait of the development of female personality and attitude and the social point of view towards women.

Each heroine reflects some of the ideas, the concepts, and the reactions of her time.

Basically, the stories are those of transformation. They are about the turning of one kind of girl into

something very different, yet each heroine reacts in a different way. This may be seen when one of the daughters of a noble man or a king plays a passive role. She waits to be rescued to live happily ever after with her hero, while another fights to get her wish.

Early Disney heroines adhere to the passive princess's role. *Snow_White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) is a tale in which the nice, soft girl is punished for being beautiful. Her jealous stepmother forces her into a common role. She is young, with beautiful eyes, too downcast to be drowned in, a mouth not pouting, but trilling away like a mad thing as she goes about her tiresome housework.. With limbs whose suppleness and length can only be gussed.¹ She is that loved and wanted girl of the 1930s and 1940s. Beauty engulfs her face and soul in addition to her polite manners. But she is forced to leave her fatherly shelter and find a new refuge because of her wicked stepmother, the queen.

Snow white does not leave her home by her own will, but by the effect of an outer force. She dreams that one-day something or someone will set her free and out of the boundaries of her palace. While in the palace, she pounces around like a tart in a trance, pretending that one day her prince will

come to marry and save her. "I will fly like those birds, a huntsman will catch me."² (p. 28)

The story goes on, and Snow White finds a new nest. She no longer lives under the protection of one person, but that of seven kind-hearted dwarfs. They provide her with the shelter; she needs, in their isolated cottage in the big forest, where her stepmother sends her to die: "... take care... that you open the door to none when we are not with you." (P. 35)

The wicked queen attacks the helpless princess in her new shelter again. Snow White is poisoned when she bites a poisoned red apple. After her supposed death, the seven Dwarfs put her (again protecting her) in a glassy coffin.

It is obvious that the theme of protection is basic in the tale, though the images are varied. First, Snow White is a fetus in her mother's womb; second, she lives under the protection of her father and stepmother within the protection of palace walls. Then, she is taken care of in the forest under the protection of the good seven Dwarfs. After her "death", she is put in a glassy coffin to protect her beauty from the effects of soil.

Women must be protected was the idea when *The Snow White & the Seven*

Dwarfs was presented on movies for the first time.³ They do nothing but wait for prince charming to be rescued and restored back to life.

The *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) presents the ideal picture expected of woman in the 1950s. In this cartoon a good princess also falls under the curse of a bad demi-witch fairy "when you [would be] sixteen, you would injure yourself with a spindle and die." (p.50) But the good fairy tries her best to help and protect the princess by chanting a magic spell to change the curse from death to a very deep sleep. No one is able to help, unless someone comes and falls deeply in love with her. She will then be set free from the curse. But "[h]ow [can] a man fall in love with a sleeping girl?" the broken-hearted mother queen sobs (p.52). To solve the problem, the good fairy casts a spell over the whole castle. Under this spell all the soldiers, ministers, guards, servants, pages, cooks, maids and knights, fall into deep sleep along with their princess and wake up when she does.

In this situation, the good fairy rescues the princess, who is helpless and unable to protect herself. Until the age of sixteen, her parents protect her. They prevent her from seeing or using a spindle. She does not think or decide

for herself, but others do. After touching the spindle and falling asleep, she is laid on her bed surrounded by bunches of flowers waiting for her rescuer. Even the plants and trees around the castle grow in a way to make a dome, emphasizing the element of protection.

Years later, a prince finds the sleeping castle. He finds the princess's room. As he stands there watching her, his heart is filled with love towards her. He comes close and kisses her. At his kiss, the princess suddenly opens her eyes and looks at him. The first thing she utters is: "Oh, you [had] come at last! I was waiting for you in my dream. [I'd] waited so long!"(p.52) Yes she has "waited" for a long time for him to rescue her. She can neither rescue herself, nor grasp her destiny and react against harm exercised against her. To the contrary she is forced to wait and wait passively for that special someone came to help her. Thus the element of passive waiting is obvious in her words.

Women as society in that time stressed must occupy a secondary position. They are weak, fragile; and unable to function without the help of men. This was the general attitude society expected from women, but in reality women of the 1950s were ascending

the social ladder and claiming good positions in western societies Yet the general attitude remained the same; women must be protected..

There is a gap though in the presentation of female characters from the 1950s with its *Sleeping Beauty* to the 1980s when the "The *Little Mermaid*" was produced. There is no identified obvious female character in Disney's productions between these two decades.

By the release of *The Little Mermaid* in (1989), Disney had become a great big company. Walt Disney himself had died some forty years earlier* and his followers realized the new changes in the world so, *The Little Mermaid* appeared with new theme acting.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Disney gives the audience another beautiful princess, but with the dynamics changed. Here, she is Ariel, the lovely young mermaid with the ambitious dream. She has seen a handsome prince, while swimming near the shore. She yearns to become human to marry him. But she has to make some sacrifices. In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel is not Snow White or Sleeping Beauty, waiting for their prince charming to come to the rescue. Here, Ariel tries

* We are addressing the company of Disney metaphorically as Disney.

and does her best to overcome the situation, change her nature, and follow the call of her heart: "Her eyes sought the young Prince...[s]he kisse[s] his high forehead, and strok[s] his wet away from his face." (p.296)

In Ariel's case a new concept is presented. Ariel pursues her dreams and bargains with her opposite, Ursula, the sea witch who is a hybrid of Mae West, an octopus and rapacious creature.

Ariel is more active than Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. She is smart and thinks for herself. She stands against her father's will (The god of the sea) "No, I will risk to win him." (p. 307)

Her deep love for the human prince drives her to strike a deal with Ursula. The sea witch changes Ariel's tail into human legs, so that she can walk with her prince on land. In return, the other side of the bargain demands that Ariel pays a dear price. It states that if the prince does not kiss her within two days of her transformation, she will die.

Unlike the former heroines, Ariel does not wait for her fate. She has command on her destiny, thinks and acts independently and rebelliously against her father and species. "Human beings became more and more dear to her

everyday; she wishes that she were one of them." (p.306)

The element of bargain itself shows that she has control over her life. She does not seek protection. She wants to break the chains and relinquish her old way of life. She does that first by standing against her father's will. Second; by breaking the royal traditions, as she goes to bargain by herself and does not send someone on her behalf. Third, she makes up her mind and chooses to exchange her tail and voice with human legs. But the new legs cause her pain and she feels like walking over broken glass or sharp knives: "[She] [feels] as though a sharp knife passed through [her] body." (p. 307)

The result of this revolution, as shown in the cartoon and the original story, is something not easily comprehended. First, Ariel loses her voice to Ursula. Then, she loses her identity, as she no longer belongs to her species and family. In addition to that, her beloved prince abandons her for a new love. All these losses leave her crushed with pain and lost between her old world and the world she has chosen, but rejects her: "An eternal night, in which ...neither thinking nor dreaming waited her." (p.312)

In one-way or another, Disney tries to show that time has changed, and women are going to hold their destiny in their hands. But still, there are many obstructions. Women of the eighties were still fighting for their rights, in spite of the fact that many of them were living freely. Yet, they still faced the social and psychological denial exercised against them by the other sex. It can also be said that Ariel's loss and her final death represent the cry of many women, who are trying to find their way in the new developing world but are faced with protests and obstacles.

By 1995 Disney turns many of these concepts around when he presents his new heroine Pocahontas. Pocahontas is the daughter of the Mighty Chief Powhatan, the Red Indian ruler of Virginia (as it was named by the English settlers in America). Her name means the "naughty" or the spoiled child. During her childhood she is playful and hard to control. But she is also the Indian female, who, through her wisdom, saves the life a white soldier.

From the beginning, Disney presents her playing in the forest freely with the birds and animals. She looks different in her appearance. She is beautiful, with long dark hair, brownish skin and

beautiful brown eyes. While his former heroines had white skin, blue eyes and tiny noses.

It can be realized from her appearance that she is full of dignity, assertive, and has a free spirit. The new Disney heroin models the modern feminine icon. She pursues her goals and submits to no one. Brave and athletic, she climbs mountains, trees, and steers her canoe better than a man does. She is a "women who run[s] with wolves,"⁴ (p.34) she does what she wants, and she does it well. John Smith came with other soldiers to Pocahontas's land in 1907, in their attempt to explore the virgin land and the native people.⁵

Villains in this new Disney fantasy are the greedy white men who come to exploit the land and steal its gold. In contrast, the Indians seem flawless. They care for the land. They commune with its spirits. They love each other. Two contrasted pictures, and a new way to look at things. Smith and his men try to seize the land. Smith unwittingly offers to build an English civilization on Indian land. This leads to tension and war is about to break between Smith's soldiers and the natives over the land. Pawhatan, the father, catches Smith and sentences him to death. But Pocahontas, who has fallen in love with the white captain,

tries a lot to stop his killing, but her father insists that he dies. As a sign of her daring, and courageous personality she put her head beside Smith's to force her father to stop his clubbing. "Pocahontas, the king's dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, she got his head in her arms, and laid her own upon his to save him from death." (p.37)

Again when Smith asks her to marry him and leave her people, she refuses because she believes that she has her own job in her own land. Here Pocahontas is portrayed as a daring free willed colored girl. When she first talks she uses philosophy and wisdom "where [was] my path?" (p.41), she decides for herself that she has to find her own path as she called it. Here we see that man helps the woman. He no longer tries to control her or become overprotective. Smith shows Pocahontas where "her true path [lays]" (p.58), by using his compass, "see this arrow is leading to your village, follow it." (p.52) This situation may symbolically answer Pocahontas' question about her true path.

This is an indication that man is not that same old one who is always in command and controls situations, but rather he helps his mate, who is no longer seen as a second-class creature.

Pocahontas turns into a myth and her statue is found, today, in the State Virginia. She becomes the symbol of forgiveness and the broken chain of slavery. She is not a passive female but an active and decisive woman. At the time of Pocahontas's release, Disney felt that the world has changed. There is no place for women waiting or looking for protection. But the general trend is a great marsh for women to break all the bonds that were/are chaining them to earth, and preventing from flying.

Conclusion

After this merry sailing throughout the productions and characters of Walt Disney, one can say that even the world of cartoon has the ability to reflect what life looked like at the time the movie release.

With *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, women are polite, soft and passive. In the *Sleeping Beauty*, women do nothing but wait and wait for their rescue and freedom. But with Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, the view towards women changes in an obvious way. Here the female does not only dream and think, but she acts. She sets to get what she wants though with some sacrifices and losses.

The final character Pocahontas represents a dramatic change. She is dreaming, thinking, searching, acting, daring, doing, having and leaving with a free will.

It may be concluded that the watching of such cartoons and stories can help give a good picture of the progress of women across time, because these cartoons reflect many social concepts and points of views.

Notes

^{1.} Julie Burchill, "Pretty as a Picture," Style, 24 September 1995. pp. 6-7.

^{2.} Jiri Tranks, Favourite Tales from Grimm and Anderson, London: Galley Press, 1983. all subsequent quotations from Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and The Little Mermaid refer to this edition. The number of the pages will be enclosed in brackets in the text.

^{3.} David Morenus, Women and Society, Itheca: Yale University Press. P. 85.

^{4.} Charles Dudley Warner, The Story of Pocahontas. Missori: David Widger Co. 2004. all subsequent quotations from Pocahontas refer to this edition. The number of pages will be enclosed in brackets in the text.

^{5.} *ibid.*

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فتيات افلام والت دزني تطور الشخصيات من وايت سنوالى بوكانتاس

المدرس المساعد فاتن خليل اسماعيل
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تمكن والت دزني من خلال شخصيات الفتيات في افلامه من ان يعكس التطور الحاصل في المشهد العام للمرأة في العالم الغربي خلال فترة ستين عاماً. يهدف هذا البحث الى تسليط الضوء على كيفية تمكن الشخصيات في الافلام المتحركة من ان تغير ردة افعالها تجاه المشاكل ووسائل حل هذه المشاكل على امتداد الفترة من الثلاثينات ولغاية التسعينات من القرن الماضي. وسوف تعرف الشخصيات الرئيسية في هذه الافلام من خلال تاريخ انتاج ونشر هذه الافلام.