

From Snow to Ice: A Study of the Progression of Disney Princesses from 1937 to 2014

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Introduction

In a recent study published in 2011, Disney Princess movies were grouped into three categories: the earlier movies, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Cottrell, Hand, Jackson, Morey, Pearce, and Sharpsteen, 1937), *Cinderella* (Geronimi, Jackson, and Luske, 1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959); the middle movies, *The Little Mermaid* (Clements and Musker, 1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale and Wise, 1991), *Aladdin* (Clements and Musker, 1992), *Pocahontas* (Gabriel and Goldberg, 1995), and *Mulan* (Bancroft and Cook, 1998); and the most current film, *The Princess and the Frog* (Clements and Musker, 2009) (England 555). Since the publication of the study, Disney has released two more Princess films, *Tangled* (Greno and Howard, 2010) and *Frozen* (Buck and Lee, 2013), both falling under the “most current films” category. Each of these Disney films contains a female in the role of a princess; however as we progress from one category to the next, there is a difference in the way each group of princesses is portrayed. The princesses of the earlier movies are constantly depicted as helpless damsels in distress, only able to be saved by the help of their “Prince Charming.” As we move to the middle movies, we see a slight change in the way each princess is represented, as they become somewhat more independent from their male counterparts, while the princesses of the most current Disney films have evolved into strong women who can fend for themselves without the help of a man. By looking at various princesses of the early Disney films all the way to the princesses of the latest Disney films, we see that the way women have been portrayed as characters has progressed from that of helplessness to independence.

Early Disney films

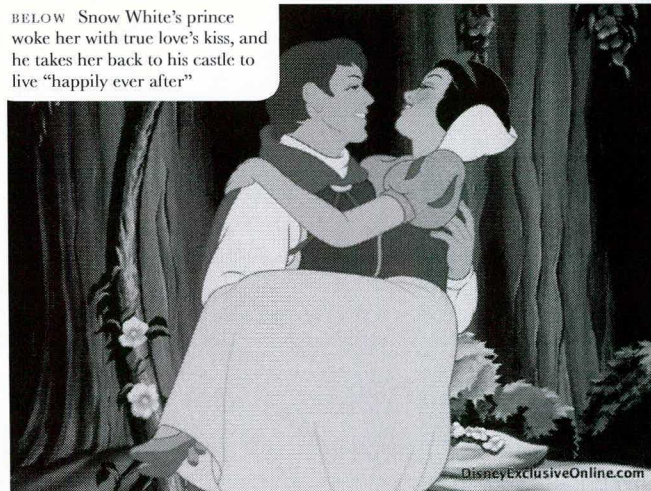
Snow White, the classic heroine from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, is the ultimate stereotype of the ideal woman in that “women are seen as domestic, focused mainly on family and personal relationships; they are considered highly emotional individuals, less competent and dependent on their male counterparts for emotional and financial support” (Matyas 4). After Snow White escapes from the huntsman, she begins to run through the woods, seeing every branch as a threatening, monster-like creature. The sky appears dark, as thunder and lightning strikes the earth while Snow White runs to find refuge from the danger in which she appears to be. However, as soon as Snow White feels that she can no longer run, the sky becomes lighter, and the weather begins to clear, implying that the danger she

previously felt was only within her mind; the danger was an effect of her emotional state. While on the run from her first dangerous encounter, Snow finds a cottage that belongs to seven men, and she makes a deal that if she cooks and cleans for the men, they will allow her to stay in the cottage. She is almost like a mother figure to the dwarfs, embodying the image of femininity where “femininity is depicted, for example, where happiness and personal satisfaction are found through marriage and motherhood” (Matyas 5). By cooking and cleaning for the men, Snow White seems to be content with her lifestyle as she waits for her prince to take her to his castle.

Through the film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White is faced with multiple instances of danger. The evil queen makes it her goal to put an end to Snow White, thus she sends her huntsman to kill Snow White. The huntsman raises his dagger for the kill only to have a change of heart when he sees the frightened look upon Snow’s face. The huntsman tells Snow to “run away” so he will not have to put an end to the life of such a helpless young woman. While no one comes to Snow’s rescue at this point in the story, the huntsman can ultimately be viewed as the male character that saves Snow White for he decided against the evil queen’s order to kill.

As the film progresses, the dwarfs are the male characters that keep Snow White safe from harm. As soon as the dwarfs leave for work, the evil queen – disguised as an old hag – appears in the window of the dwarfs’ cottage. Despite the fact that the dwarfs made sure to tell Snow White “don’t let anyone in the house,” she feels pity for the “old lady” and proceeds to let her through the door of the cottage. In this

BELOW Snow White’s prince woke her with true love’s kiss, and he takes her back to his castle to live “happily ever after”



BELOW Pocahontas throws herself between John Smith and her father's weapon



scene, Snow White is depicted as very gullible and susceptible, for she believes the old hag is presenting her with a “magic wishing apple” and ignores the woodland creatures as they try to prevent her from taking a bite. Later we find Snow “dead” from biting into a poisoned apple from the evil queen. The only way to wake from her death is a first kiss from her true love, or her prince.

Cinderella is another clear depiction of the female ideals presented throughout the early Disney Princess films. She faces adversity from the moment her father passes away, leaving her in the care, or lack thereof, of her stepmother and three stepsisters. Cinderella is forced to cater to the needs and wants of her so-called family, yet Cinderella does nothing for herself, and never tries to improve her standards of living. Cinderella eventually meets her Prince Charming at the Ball, claiming that their love “is what makes life divine.” However, once the clock strikes midnight, she quickly finds her way back into the hands of the evil stepmother, leaving her again in the position of the “damsel in distress.” Upon discovering that Cinderella is “the one” whom Prince Charming was dancing with at the Ball, the evil stepmother locks Cinderella in the attic, making her the victim of cruelty yet again. With the help of a male dog, Bruno, and two male mice, Gus and Jaq, Cinderella is released from the attic, and makes her way back to her Prince Charming to live “happily ever after.”

Sleeping Beauty, while it is the latest of the early Disney films, is perhaps the least

progressive for the female lead, Aurora. As an infant, the evil witch, Maleficent placed a curse upon Aurora, stating, “before the sun set on her sixteenth birthday, she shall prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and die.” In addition to being inflicted with an evil curse, Aurora also receives three gifts from magic fairies. These gifts are seen as blessings as she receives the gift of beauty, the gift of song, and a gift that attempts to counteract Maleficent’s evil curse –

if through this wicked witch’s trick, a spindle should your finger prick, a ray of hope there still may be in this, the gift I give to thee. Not in death, but just in sleep, the faith prophecy you will keep, and from this slumber shall you wake, where true love’s kiss the spell shall break.

While the fairies are rejoiced for weakening the effects of Maleficent’s curse, the gifts only benefit Aurora as long as she finds her true love.

Aurora does in fact prick her finger, immediately falling into a permanent sleep. Because of this, Aurora is absent from the majority of the film. Aurora first appears at eighteen minutes and seven seconds into the 75-minute film, and pricks her finger at 51-minutes; however, she only appears on-screen for a total of seventeen minutes. This being said, without the help of Prince Phillip, the story of *Sleeping Beauty* would have ended when Aurora pricked her finger. Aurora is the most helpless of all the early

Disney princesses because she is sedentary and asleep for more than half of the movie. Prince Phillip, Aurora’s true love, has to fight his way to the location of Aurora’s slumber in order to break the curse and wake her.

Classic or “early” Disney movies such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* contain female characters in the form of princesses who helplessly find themselves in harm’s way. While the danger imposed upon the princesses is very frightening, ranging anywhere from being locked away in an attic to the threat of sleeping death, the princesses react the same way in each one of the films listed above; they cower until their prince comes to their aid. This representation sends a message to the viewers that the princesses, or women in general, “are meek, submissive, overly emotional, and reliant on men” (Matyas 10), as they only find true happiness, stability, and health upon finding their true love.

The middle movies

The middle movies, ranging from 1989 to 1998, mark the beginning of Disney’s initial transition to a more active representation of the female characters. The princesses of the middle movies include Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, Jasmine from *Aladdin*, and Pocahontas and Mulan from their eponymous films. Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan are perhaps the most progressive princesses of the middle

movies for multiple reasons. The princesses of the middle movies start a trend of working together with their male counterparts in order to achieve happiness, stability, and health as opposed to waiting for the male lead to prevail individually.

Beauty and the Beast is the first of all the Disney Princess films to present a female lead in such a way that she is not helpless. Belle is an independent character, as she wants more than her “provincial life” in a “little town full of little people.” Very early on, Belle is introduced to the idea of love with the male character, Gaston; yet, she is quick to turn him down, this being the first instance in which a Disney Princess does not give in to the thought of love with the first male she encounters. Disney Princesses of the early films quickly fall in love with the first male they meet; however, Belle is simply disgusted by the idea of having any romantic relationship with Gaston. Belle is aware that she has the option to make her own decisions regarding love, and she does so by rejecting Gaston despite his many efforts to “woo and marry Belle.”

Belle is also progressive in that she takes initiative to save her father as well as the Beast, instead of expecting another male character to bring her out of her sorrow. When Belle’s father does not return from an inventing convention, Belle goes on a search to find him, eventually coming upon the Beast’s enchanted castle, where Belle’s father has been taken hostage. Belle then volunteers to take the place of her father as the hostage victim, allowing her father to go back to the comfort of his own home. Belle is the first Disney Princess to put the safety and well-being of another individual before her own. However, not only does she do this for her father, but later in the film, Belle sacrifices her reputation and sanity in order to protect the Beast. When the villagers proclaim that the Beast is a “dangerous monster” Belle stands before them and says that he is actually “very kind and sweet and gentle.” Refusing to accept what Belle declares about the Beast, an angry mob of villagers march to the enchanted castle with plans to “kill the Beast.” The Beast and Belle learn to respect each other throughout the film, and each begins to genuinely care for the other. While Gaston and the mob of villagers succeed in hurting the Beast, it is ultimately Belle’s love and respect that save the Beast from death. Unlike any of the princesses of the early Disney films, Belle saves her father, and her love interest, the Beast.

Pocahontas, another princess of the middle movies, is very similar to Belle for multiple reasons. Much like Belle, Pocahontas wants

more than the life she has led thus far. While being advised to “choose the smoothest course [because it is] steady as a beating drum,” her “dreams extend just beyond the river bend” (*Pocahontas*). Pocahontas longs for adventure, yet she is unsure of the outcomes of choosing to go “beyond the river bend.” Upon meeting John Smith, Pocahontas is cautious in approaching him, as she knows that he came from “beyond the river bend” of her dreams. Pocahontas and John Smith build a relationship around trust and teaching, yet Pocahontas’s family is not convinced that John Smith can be trusted. The family make plans to kill John Smith due to their lack of trust in him; however Pocahontas refuses to let that happen. Just as Pocahontas’s father raises his weapon to strike John Smith, Pocahontas physically throws herself upon John Smith, acting as a wall between her father’s weapon and John Smith. When her father sees the desperation and hurt in Pocahontas’s face, he decides to let John Smith live. Pocahontas, very similar to Belle, is the reason for the male lead’s survival. If Pocahontas had not put herself in a position of danger, John Smith would have been killed.

One way in which *Pocahontas* is different from any of the previous Disney Princess films is that the ending was not necessarily a “happy” one. In previous films, the endings consist of a marriage or a romantic interest between the princess and the male lead. Pocahontas has the choice to go to England with John Smith, but ultimately chooses to forgo her “happily ever after” with John Smith because she knows she is “need[ed]” at home with the rest of her family.

Mulan, released in 1998, is the last of the middle movies, and is very progressive for female characters. For the majority of the film, Mulan is disguised as a male in the Chinese army, though she is quick to make the point that “just because [she] look[s] like a man, doesn’t mean [she has] to smell like one.” At the beginning of the film, Mulan states the qualities required for a woman to be considered honorable, including poise, refinement, quietness, and punctuality. During the film, Mulan’s actions seem to go against those qualities mentioned above, as she is clumsy, talkative, and often arrives late to major events such as her matchmaker appointment. While Mulan wants nothing more than to bring honor to her family, she is unable to do so in the traditional female way. When her father is chosen to fight in the war against the Huns, Mulan decides to (illegally) represent her family in the army. In doing so, Mulan saves the men in her troupe, including the commander, and ultimately

gets credited for saving China. Mulan does not fit the dainty, girly, Disney Princess mold, for when she was unhappy with the idea of her father going to war, she took matters into her own hands to change the situation. She did not ask for permission from her parents, nor did she even say goodbye to them. Mulan simply changed the situation and went forth with confidence as well as the knowledge of every possible outcome, good or bad.

While the early Disney films remained fairly simple regarding the behavioral characteristics of the princesses and their inability to save themselves, the middle movies are very different. From saving family members and love interests in *Beauty and the Beast* and *Pocahontas*, to being the young lady to save all of China in *Mulan*, the middle movies made a large jump in the representation of female characters.

The most current films

The three most current Disney Princess films include *The Princess and the Frog*, *Tangled*, and *Frozen* (England 555). These films, especially *Tangled* and *Frozen*, highlight the idea that women have the ability to achieve their dreams without the help of a man. These films represent female characters in a way that has never been done by Disney before. Prior to the most current films, Disney suggested that women need men in order to succeed in finding love and happiness in their lives. However, the female ideals in the most current films are much more advanced and open-minded than those of the early and middle films.

The Princess and the Frog, the first of the most current Disney Princess films, is a story of a young woman, Tiana, who dreams of opening a restaurant in her home of New Orleans, Louisiana. In the first scene of the film, we see a young Tiana, and her friend Charlotte, hearing the story of “The Frog Prince.” After hearing the end of the story, Tiana is very quick to speak her displeasure at the very thought of kissing a frog, saying, “there is no way in this whole, wide world that I would ever, ever, ever, I mean never kiss a frog ... YUCK!” Charlotte is also very quick to rebuttal as she says, “I would do it. I would kiss a frog. I would kiss a hundred frogs if I could marry a prince and be a princess.” This exchange of very different opinions makes a clear distinction between the two young girls. It becomes clear that even at a young age, Tiana is unwilling to settle for love, while Charlotte dreams of true love and will go to great lengths to find it.

BELOW Anna sacrifices herself for the safety of her sister, Elsa



Later, Tiana is shown with her father. After Tiana wishes upon an evening star, her father reminds her, “that ole star can only take you so far. You got to put in some hard work of your own, and then, yeah, you can do anything you set your mind to,” setting the tone that Tiana’s family values hard work and diligence. In the scene immediately after, an adult Tiana enters her bedroom, appearing exhausted and slightly dirty from a long night of working at a diner. Tiana places her tip money into a can of saved money and says to herself, “every little penny counts.” Tiana has a dream of opening her own restaurant, and knows that from her hard work she is “almost there.” Through a strange twist of fate, Tiana kisses a frog that actually happens to be the visiting Prince Naveen. Her act results in her being transformed into a frog as well. Throughout the course of the film, Tiana refuses the thought of love, and keeps her mind focused on the idea of owning her own restaurant. However, as Tiana and Prince Naveen continue on their quest of breaking the curse, they begin to care for one another and develop feelings for one another, although neither wants to be the first to admit it. Upon discovering that the only way to break the spell is a “kiss from a princess,” the two begin to lose hope and accept their lives as frogs. After admitting their true feelings, the two were married and shared a kiss, a kiss that broke the curse, for Tiana became a princess the moment she married Prince Naveen. After breaking the curse and returning to human form, Tiana was able to open her own restaurant, using the money she saved from her hard work.

The plot of *The Princess and the Frog* is very reliant on the success and presence of Tiana, for her strong will and perseverance was her initial motivation for finding a way to break the spell. Prince Naveen, the male lead, is ultimately the cause of all Tiana’s problems. Prince Naveen, is the reason Tiana is turned into a frog, yet the responsibility of finding a solution is left to Tiana. Tiana works hard throughout the entire course of the film to fulfill her dream of owning a restaurant as well as saving herself and Prince Naveen from eternal “frogdom.”

Tangled, Disney’s version of Rapunzel, begins like many previous Disney films in that the lead female, in this case Rapunzel, is living a blissfully ignorant life in a world of adversity. When we are initially introduced to Rapunzel, she has never stepped foot outside, for she has been locked in a tower by Mother Gothel, the evil witch who acts as Rapunzel’s mother. Rapunzel is unaware that Mother Gothel is actually an evil witch, only using Rapunzel for her youthful powers. Rapunzel truly believes that Mother Gothel is her actual mother, as she often states, “mother knows best,” numerous times throughout the film. Mother Gothel keeps Rapunzel very sheltered, for she forbids Rapunzel from leaving the castle. As Rapunzel gets older, she longs for adventure, often asking herself, “When will my life begin?” Rapunzel gets her chance to begin her life outside of her tower when Flynn Rider, a thief on the run, appears at her window. Unlike the early Disney Princesses, Rapunzel does not become smitten by the mysteries and good looks of Flynn Rider. Instead, Rapunzel is frightened by Flynn Rider’s sudden presence, and hits him with a frying pan, knocking him

unconscious. Rapunzel discovers that Flynn is carrying a tiara, the object that Rapunzel uses to convince Flynn to help her out of the tower. While Flynn Rider does help Rapunzel out of the tower, to the floating lights, Rapunzel is the individual with the power. In a way, Rapunzel manipulates Flynn Rider into getting her wish by only agreeing to give him the tiara once the task is completed. While Rapunzel does use the help of a man in order to achieve her dream, she does not necessarily need him. Flynn Rider is more in need, for he needs to reclaim the tiara, only being able to do so if he helps Rapunzel.

Most progressive of all the Disney Princess movies, however, is *Frozen*. *Frozen* goes against every traditional Disney Princess movie formula, even making fun of the previous movies through subtle jokes. One major difference between *Frozen* and previous Disney Princess films is the fact that there are two female leads present, Queen Elsa and Princess Anna. While there are male characters, the plot of *Frozen* revolves around the trials and tribulations of Elsa and Anna. The men only play small roles, really having nothing to do with the fate of Elsa and Anna.

Another way in which *Frozen* is the most progressive of all the Disney Princess films has to do with the jokes made about previous Disney films. Upon being introduced to Hans, Anna’s first love interest, Elsa states, “you can’t marry a man you just met.” It should be noted here that Anna and Hans met one another and announced their engagement on the same night. Also, a subtle joke about bestiality can be heard during the song “Fixer Upper,” as the lyrics are, “his thing with the reindeer that’s a little outside

of nature's laws." This can be seen as a joke regarding the relationship shared by Belle and the Beast, in *Beauty and the Beast*.

All of the reasons above contribute to the progressiveness of *Frozen*, yet, perhaps the most important and influential concept illustrated in *Frozen*, is that the bond shared between two sisters is, in fact, true love. At the end of the movie, an act of true love is required in order to cure a frozen heart. When Anna sacrifices herself to save Elsa from getting struck by a sword, an act of true love was performed, ultimately breaking the curse and curing the frozen heart. *Frozen* was very shocking to the audience because for the first time, not just one, but two Disney Princesses received their "happily ever after" without the help of a man. For the first time, a man was not necessary for an act of true love to occur.

In conclusion, Disney Princesses have come a long way in the past 77 years. From initially being portrayed as less competent than their male counter parts, Disney Princesses have evolved into very well-rounded individuals, able to take care of themselves without a man's aid (Matyas 10). The princesses of today's Disney films are no longer reliant on men to receive an act of true love (Matyas 10). The Disney Princess films have progressed with nearly every movie, therefore as more films are made, one can only assume that further progression will occur.

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