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English Informatics

Gender Roles Portrayed in Disney Princess Films:

Depictions of Time Periods

The word “fairytale” has captured the hearts of young children since the times of authors Charles Perrault and the Grimm brothers. The stories of magic, adventures of princesses being rescued by the handsome prince, and happily ever afters sparked a gleam in their eyes and a glow in their hearts. Even adults could not help but be enchanted by the narratives. When these wondrous tales evolved from storytelling and the pages of books to the screens in film, society could experience the stories they all knew and loved in a whole new way. Disney became a legendary icon for fairy tales. Many today have grown up singing along to the familiar tunes of Disney princess films as well as the loveable characters who sang them. Films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty* altered the original authors’ tales to match the outlook of society at the time. The newest edition to the Disney princess collection, *Tangled*, has also won the hearts of many young and old. Every Disney film has a moral to the story intended for children, but what message are these stories revealing about gender roles of when the films were produced? After compiling and analyzing the texts from the films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Tangled*, I observed how Disney princess films portray the gender roles of the time they were created.

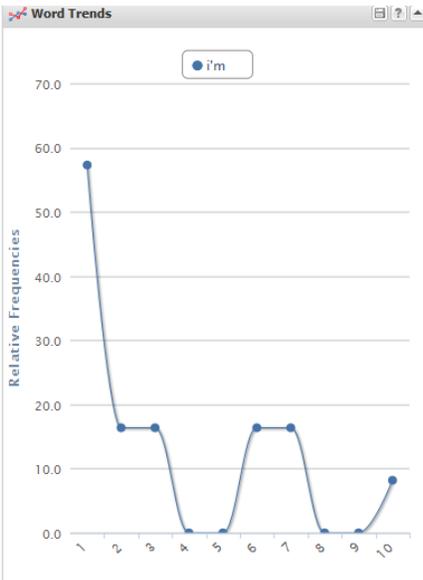
The film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, originally written by the Grimm brothers, was released in 1937; the very first Disney princess film as well as the first Disney film

produced. The plot stars a young, beautiful princess named Snow White who resides with her evil stepmother, the queen, who is determined to be the “fairest of them all” according to the magic mirror (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). In order to become the fairest in the land, the sinister and selfish queen orders her to be killed in the forest by a huntsman. When the huntsman does not have the heart to do so, Snow White is left to hide from the queen and fend for herself. She stumbles upon a quaint cottage that could use some tidying up. Little to her knowledge, the home belongs to seven quirky dwarves who allow her to remain in their house as she can cook and clean. The queen soon discovers that Snow White is still alive and disguises herself in order to poison her with an apple which sends her into deep sleep which can only be broken by true love’s kiss. The dwarves seek revenge on the queen and she perishes after falling off a cliff. Snow White is placed in a glass coffin, as the dwarves believe her to be dead. The prince, who fell in love with Snow White’s beauty and singing voice, awakens her from the spell and takes her away to his castle.

During the time period that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was released, America had seen better days. The Great Depression was upon the United States, which made times difficult. The typical gender roles before involved the man as the breadwinner and head of the household, while the women remained at home cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children. During the Great Depression, however, when the men “lost their jobs or saw their incomes reduced, they felt like failures because they couldn’t take care of their families” (Ware). The traditional gender roles were no longer traditional. The women during this time also broke the old-fashioned stereotypes as well. Some women took it upon themselves in order to earn their families income. This was not always easy as “Women who sought relief or paid employment risked public scorn

or worse for supposedly taking jobs and money away from more deserving men” (Ware). Society still viewed males as the household’s breadwinners and females as good housewives.

The film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* depicts these late 1930s roles by portraying what society at the time viewed as the stereotypical woman. After using the Voyant textual analysis tool, the character Snow White’s dialog totaled to 1,222 words with 391 unique words (*Voyant Tools: Reveal Your Texts*). The top words that appeared were “oh,” “I’m,” “tsk,” and “come.” The word “oh” was used thirty-one times. In context, it was used frequently as an exclamation for her reaction to the state of the untidy cottage as well as the dwarves. The word



“I’m” presents another interesting discovery. The word trend alone, according to the graphic on the left, shows how the word is mostly used in the beginning of the movie and then plummets down as the film progresses. “I’m” in context is used to describe what the young princess wants in her life. In the beginning of the film, Snow White sings “I’m hoping,” “I’m wishing,” and “I’m dreaming of the one to find me”

Figure 1: Snow White "I'm" word trend. (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). As the word trend graph displays, Snow White uses the word mostly to state what she desires in her life, which is a man to rescue her and live happily ever after. She only wishes for a man to make her happy. Instead of her taking initiative and finding what she truly desires, she waits for it to come to her. In other instances, she uses the word “I’m” to describe her feelings such as “I’m sorry,” “I’m so ashamed,” and “I’m so happy” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). The context of the word “I’m” depicts a stereotypical woman who is hung up on her emotions and shows no signs of authority or independence. Another word that is used twelve times is “tsk” which, in context, is

used to comment on the dirty and unkempt state of the dwarves' home and the dwarves themselves. Snow White even exclaims, "Look at that broom, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk!" (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). The social standards of women at the time were to be a good housewife and be "passive, pretty, patient, obedient, industrious, and quiet," which is exactly who Snow White's character is (Beckstett). Even though Snow White was intended to portray the heroine in the film, she actually illustrates a helpless, stereotypical woman who waits for her handsome prince to rescue her.

Snow White's prince, whose name is not mentioned in the film, is seen and heard briefly in the film; he appears in the beginning and at the end. After pasting the prince's lines in the Voyant tool, I was surprised to discover he even spoke sixty-six words with forty-three unique words (*Voyant Tools: Reveal Your Texts*). The top three words the prince mentions are "one," "song," and "love." The word "one" is spoken eight times when he serenades Snow White from below the balcony, which slightly refers to the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* in which the pair speaks for the first time and fall in love. In context, "one" is used to describe "one song for you," "one heart," and "one love" in which all reference to his one true love for Snow White (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). Again, the prince and the princess meet once and are instantly in love, similar to the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*. Love is only mentioned three times by the prince in which he sings of his love to her. Most of the prince's dialog is him singing to his supposed beloved. He falls in love with her beauty and singing voice. The prince is able to woo Snow White instantly by merely singing to her. This portrays women as being shallow and naïve and men also as shallow and only attracted to beautiful women with beautiful voices.

The original Grimm brothers' tale, *Little Briar Rose*, was adapted by Disney to the film *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959. The tale begins with the celebration of Princess Aurora's birth. Three

good fairies come to bestow gifts upon the child. The first gives her the gift of beauty and the second, the gift of song. Just before the third could bless the child, the evil fairy, Maleficent arrives angry that she was not invited to the celebration. She curses Aurora to prick her finger on a spindle of a spinning wheel and die on the eve of her sixteenth birthday. The third fairy lightens the curse so that the princess only falls into a deep sleep instead of death and only true love's kiss could awaken her. In an attempt to prevent the prophecy, the three fairies hide the princess in a cottage in the woods and give her the alias, Briar Rose. It is there that she meets and falls in love with the man of her dreams, not knowing he is Prince Phillip, the man she is betrothed to. Unfortunately, the prophecy comes true as Aurora is lured to a spinning wheel by Maleficent. After Aurora has fallen into a deep sleep, her true love, the prince, fights to rescue the princess after being freed by the three good fairies from the grips of the evil Maleficent. The young prince faces Maleficent, who has turned herself into a ferocious dragon. After defeating the dragon, the prince awakens the sleeping beauty with true love's kiss and Aurora lives happily ever after with her prince.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the time period *Sleeping Beauty* was produced, many aspects of women's roles had changed and others still did not. Many federal laws in favor of women were on the brink of being passed such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963 which required "equal pay for equal work without discrimination on the basis of sex" ("The Feminist Chronicles," 1963). Another positive aspect for women was the availability of birth control in 1959. "Although available for decades, it was not until this year that the American Medical Association (AMA) finally sanctioned birth control" ("The Feminist Chronicles," 1959). Even though women were gaining more freedoms, the aspects of the stereotypical woman still haunted this era. The introduction of the Barbie Doll, although a wondrous new toy for young girls, still

portrayed how women should appear, beautiful, skinny, and perfect in every way (“The Feminist Chronicles,” 1959). These young girls were fed the idea of who they were supposed to be and look like. During this time period, women were married as young as nineteen and began having large families right away (“People & Events”). The time period that *Sleeping Beauty* was released mirrors the film itself.

After studying the text of *Sleeping Beauty*, using the Voyant textual analysis tool once again, I was not surprised to find that Aurora, or Sleeping Beauty, spoke only 377 words with 156 unique words (*Voyant Tools: Reveal Your Texts*). Since Aurora falls into a deep sleep for a majority of the film, I could only expect that her dialog would be quite small. Already, this depicts that the princess is helpless as she only “lies back, closes her eyes, and waits to be saved” (“Disney Film's Evolutionary”). In order to fulfill her dreams, Aurora does nothing but wait, as does Snow White.

The word most frequently used, as with Snow White, is “oh” at fourteen times. Although that is not even half as many times as Snow White mentions the word, the context is similar. In context, “oh” is used mostly as an exclamation of surprise, happiness, or despair. The word is only mentioned twice in context in order to explain her dream prince such as “Oh, we walked together” and “Oh a prince” (*Sleeping Beauty*). Out of the fourteen times the word is mentioned, “oh” is either spoken to the prince or about the prince. The second most mentioned word is “know.” It is used nine times, mostly in context with the prince again. In song, Aurora sings “I know you” and “I know it’s true” (*Sleeping Beauty*). “Know” is mentioned once to ask the creatures of the forest “You know something?” revealing a dependent woman by asking instead of stating (*Sleeping Beauty*). In order for her to be happy, as with Snow White, Aurora wants a

handsome prince to whisk her away to his

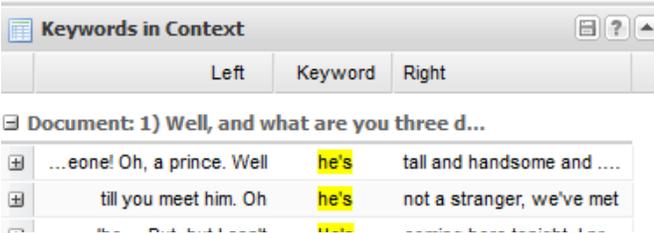


Figure 2: *Sleeping Beauty* "he's" in context.

castle. The words “he’s” and “prince” are mentioned three times each, both referring to Prince Phillip. In context, “he’s” refers to her dream prince which is “tall and handsome and so romantic” (*Sleeping Beauty*). The graphic on the left above also depicts how Aurora justifies meeting and falling in love with a complete stranger as they have met “once upon a dream” (*Sleeping Beauty*). The word “prince” in context is basically used the same way as the word “he’s.” Aurora refers to the prince as the man of her dreams and that he is tall, handsome, and romantic. It is interesting that when Aurora meets Prince Phillip, she does not know he is a prince and falls in love with him anyway, even though she describes her love as her “dream prince” (*Sleeping Beauty*). When the three good fairies inform Aurora who she really is, a princess, and tell her she is betrothed Prince Phillip, she goes into despair. It seems to me that Aurora is still unsure of what she wants as she dreams of falling in love with a prince and then falls in love with someone she believes to be a commoner.

Another interesting discovery I made was after studying a dialog between King Stefan, Aurora’s father, and King Hubert, Prince Phillip’s father. Upon Princess Aurora’s return to the kingdom, the two kings discuss their children’s marriage. Not only are the two quite young for marriage, as many women were during the time period the film was made, but they were also discussing grandchildren already. King Hubert states, “There’s no time to lose! Getting on in years. To the wedding!” (*Sleeping Beauty*). King Stefan remarks later, “Precisely. And as for grandchildren, I’ll have the royal woodcarvers start work on the cradle tomorrow” (*Sleeping Beauty*). The two kings are eager to have their children married and starting a family when, to their knowledge, they have not even met yet.

As expected, Prince Phillip did not have many lines throughout the film as well. His dialog only totaled to 202 words with 112 unique words (*Voyant Tools: Reveal Your Texts*). The

number one word was “dream” at five times. Two out of the five times it was mentioned, Prince Phillip uses it in a song titled “Once upon a dream.” He uses it once when speaking to Aurora, again justifying that they have met before, “once upon a dream” (*Sleeping Beauty*). The last time it is mentioned is when the prince stands up for his father, the king, by saying he met the girl of his dreams, whom he plans to marry. He takes action and stands up to those who oppose his dreams, unlike Aurora who weeps in despair and does nothing. Prince Phillip proves this again as the second most used word is “father” at four times. In context, the prince mentions “father” to address his father. He explains to him that he will marry the girl he loves, whom he believes to be a peasant girl. Unlike Aurora, it does not matter to him whether or not she is of royal blood. The prince does, however, fall in love with Aurora’s beautiful voice first as he exclaims, “Hear that, Samson? Beautiful! What is it? Come on, let's find out” (*Sleeping Beauty*). The word “know” is also used four times by the prince. He uses “know” once to explain to his father that he does not “know who she was,” and yet he was still willing to marry her (*Sleeping Beauty*). After analyzing this text, I could only conclude that status and appearance are all that matters to Aurora and vocal skills and appearance appeal to the prince.

The story of *Rapunzel*, also originally written by the Grimm brothers, was adapted by Disney in 2010 to a film called *Tangled*. The tale begins by telling of a magical flower with healing powers as well as the gift of immortality to whoever sings to it. Gothel, the antagonist of the story, uses this power to remain young. When Rapunzel’s mother falls ill, the flower is used to heal her. Rapunzel is born with beautiful golden hair. When Gothel realizes this, she steals the child and raises her as Rapunzel’s hair glows when she sings and keeps Gothel young. When it is cut, Rapunzel’s hair turns brown and loses its powers. Rapunzel grows up isolated in a tower far away in the forest. Gothel does not ever allow her to leave the tower. As the young princess

grows, she is entranced by the floating lanterns that are sent into the sky every year on her birthday. It becomes her dream to one day see them in person. One day, a young man, who is also a thief named Flynn Rider, takes refuge in the tower. Rapunzel takes him captive and asks him to take her to see the lanterns. Along the way, they develop a love connection and Flynn later admits his true name is Eugene Fitzherbert. Later, Flynn is captured and sentenced to death for his crimes and Rapunzel, thinking Flynn abandoned her, leaves with Gothel. Rapunzel later realizes she is the lost princess and attempts to flee the tower. Flynn tries to rescue the princess, but Rapunzel ends up saving his life with a single tear drop, as her hair was cut by Flynn in order to defeat Gothel. The princess is reunited with her parents and Flynn and Rapunzel eventually marry.

Gender roles have evolved a great deal since the Great Depression and late 1950s. Women are no longer confined to the home and men are not the only breadwinners. In some households, the husband remains at home and the wife makes the main income. The work force is both for women and men. Hilary Clinton was in the running to become America's next president in 2008. Times have changed, but is that portrayed in today's Disney princess film, *Tangled*?

After pasting Rapunzel's lines into Voyant, I was not surprised at the number of words which totaled to 2,262 words with 588 unique words. The fact that Rapunzel spoke more than Snow White and Sleeping Beauty spoke alone led me to believe that Rapunzel definitely represented a stronger, more independent woman. The number one word in the corpus was "I'm" at thirty-two times. In context, it was used to describe how Rapunzel is about take action or lead in some way. She also uses the word to define who she is, proving my first thought about her not being the helpless damsel in distress. For example, Rapunzel states "I'm finally gonna do it" and

“I’m not afraid of you” in the film (*Tangled*). Another word mentioned often is “know” at seventeen times. In context, Rapunzel uses the word “know” to show she knows what she is speaking of. It is also used to reassure others that she does have knowledge about something. Again, she is not the naïve princess as portrayed in the previous films. “I’ve” was mentioned eighteen times by Rapunzel throughout the movie. Six out of those eighteen times, she references to her dream. Instead of dreaming to meet a man and fall in love, she dreams of seeing the floating lanterns. Maybe this is used as an excuse to escape the isolation of the tower. This makes me conclude that maybe Rapunzel is the strong female character as intended.

The second most mentioned word is “mother” at twenty-seven times. This intrigued me, so I investigated further. In context, Rapunzel mentions “mother” in addressing or speaking of Gothel, whom she believes to be her mother. Since Rapunzel is isolated to the tower for eighteen years, her entire life, she grew a strong attachment to her mother, who is always there to make sure her source of immortality does not escape. Rapunzel also mentions Flynn or Eugene’s name throughout the film, instead of only at the end. This states, again, that Rapunzel is looking for an outside connection from her isolated tower. These details alone reveal that maybe Rapunzel is not the independent woman she is intended to be.

The male hero in the film, Flynn Rider, later revealed as Eugene Fitzherbert, speaks more than Rapunzel, despite the fact that Rapunzel is the supposed protagonist. At 2,327 words with 710 unique words, Flynn speaks about one hundred more words than Rapunzel, a trend that does not happen in either *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* or *Sleeping Beauty*. One of the most mentioned words Flynn states is “know,” which is similar to Rapunzel’s word corpus. In context, the word “know” is used similarly to how Rapunzel uses it, which is to state he has knowledge of something or is reassuring others that he knows. This leads me to determine that *Tangled*

portrays how stereotypical gender roles have evolved since the first Disney princess films; men

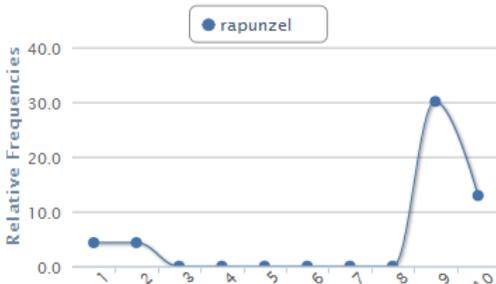


Figure 3: Flynn Rider "Rapunzel" word trend

and women are equals. Flynn mentions Rapunzel's name, which the other princes do not, in the beginning and the end as a narrator. Since the tale is about Rapunzel, why is the male protagonist

narrating a story that is not even his as he mentions in

the beginning, "Don't worry, this is actually a very fun story and the truth is it isn't even mine.

This is the story of a girl named Rapunzel" (*Tangled*). The word trend image on the left portrays

how Flynn does not mention her name until the end of the film. In context, Flynn uses her name

to call out to her so he could rescue her. The fact that he mentions her name toward the end

reveals Flynn's true feelings for the princess; however the man is once again rescuing the

princess trapped in a tower. The fact that Flynn Rider is a thief and does not reveal his true name

until later in the movie depicts what women desire today, which is a "bad boy" who is also

mysterious instead of the charming prince.

After carefully analyzing these three movies' scripts, I have come to many conclusions. I

never realized how the films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty* were so

similar. Both include submissive and naïve women who wait for their prince to take them away

to their castle. All they dream about is a handsome prince and marriage. In *Tangled*, Rapunzel

dreams of escaping her captivity and seeing the floating lanterns, which could represent

experiencing life in general. After fulfilling her dream, she then discovers a new dream, which is

to be with Flynn Rider, her guide to the floating the lights. Rapunzel calls many of the shots

compared to Flynn, and yet Flynn is the one who narrates the beginning and the end of the story.

All three princesses are sheltered their entire lives and only escape when a man comes to

“rescue” them. Notice how none of these female characters have a father figure, so they could possibly be seeking that male figure in their lives. The films *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty* both represent the time periods they were released in. Although the female protagonist in *Tangled* seems to depict a strong, independent woman of today’s society, she is still a sheltered princess waiting to be rescued from her tower. The princes in the first two films depict charming, handsome, and reserved male figures who save the princess in the end with a kiss. Flynn Rider in *Tangled* on the other hand, is the complete opposite. A thief to begin with, he attempts to manipulate Rapunzel to return his stolen goods, but in the end, Rapunzel was the one who wooed him as well as rescued him. All in all, Disney princess films all have aspects in common; the male figure rescues the princess from certain doom and they all lived happily ever after.

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