

ENGLISH 1101

Student: Caroline Smith

Teacher: Ms. Lisa Bolding

The Not So Wonderful World of Disney

The “Wonderful World of Disney” has been a part of America for as long as I can remember. With its movies, television shows, songs, theme parks, toys, and fictional characters, Disney is the epitome of children’s entertainment. Disney serves as one of the largest sources of entertainment to Americans, which is why it reigns as a commercial success and influence in our country. According to Henry Giroux, a popular critic of the Walt Disney Company, Disney’s immense success also represents “the power of the culture industries to mediate and influence almost every aspect of our lives” (19). However, does Disney stand for pure and innocent entertainment, or does it carry alternative motives that seem to be well-hidden from the public eye? Many critics argue that Disney productions have the ability to affect American children and families through their insensitive portrayal of certain aspects of society and culture.

Critics mark the idea of negative social influences as one of Disney’s most ubiquitous problems. In a study done on the role of the Walt Disney Company, Vincent Faherty explains that Disney displays certain aspects of “social vulnerability which need to be raised to a level of public consciousness, given they do affect so many children and families “(17). For example, Disney emphasizes social vulnerability through the overwhelming male dominance displayed in their animated films. Faherty argues that even though there have been recent movies such as *Mulan* and *Pocahontas*, which portray strong female roles, “the quantitative disproportion of male characters in Disney animated films needs to be addressed if we expect children to be able to relate to appropriate role models” (19). Lack of females in Disney animated films may give children an altered view of modern society, where men serve as the most influential participants. Males are usually the heroes, the villains, and the parent figures in Disney movies. If men are always the heroes, then women are always the ones who have to be rescued. Females in Disney films lack the ability to save their own lives. The negative influence comes with males who play the typical “bad guy” roles. Faherty explains that the prevalence of males in villainous roles “should be analyzed for its potential negative impact on children and their relationships with caring male adults” (19). Along with heroes and villains, males seem to dominate the parent figures as well. In her book *Deconstructing Disney*, Eleanor Byrne explains the phenomena that the female characters in most Disney movies typically exist as teenaged girls with no mother. She points out that in the instance of *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, “Ariel’s mother is never mentioned, neither is Belle’s; in subsequent films, Princess Jasmine is motherless in *Aladdin*, Pocahontas bonds with her father by grieving over her dead mother, and Quasimodo’s mother dies on the steps of Notre-Dame in the opening sequence of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*” (Byrne 66-67). All of these examples illustrate the presence of teenaged girls who build relationships with their fathers but are left to grow without a mother. Some critics argue that children do not learn the proper value of a mother from viewing Disney movies such as these. Collectively, there is a large significance that lies in the social

vulnerabilities surrounding males and females in Disney films.

Critics condemn Disney not only for the gender misrepresentations in Disney movies, but also for the way Disney portrays different races and ethnicities. These criticisms hold importance when evaluating their impact on American children and families. Vincent Faherty notes that “the virtual absence of minorities and color and of Hispanic ancestry in Disney films is troubling” (18). In the movie *Dumbo*, the first movie to have racially marked characters, the audience in the circus all “inhabit a set of codes that are readily recognizable as performances of blackness which conform to white audience expectations” (Byrne 95). Similarly, the study of Faherty reveals that the movies such as *Tarzan* and *The Lion King*, which are both set in Africa, “do not portray any human characters of African decent” (18). The only African characters in the movies are slow speaking orangutans that seemed to know less about the jungle compared to the other characters. When Disney created a *Tarzan* movie with no blacks, critics argued that they were promoting white supremacy to kids. When it comes to representations of different ethnicities, African Americans are not the only victims. According to a study about Disney’s impact by Robert Pettit, Disney faced criticism when they portrayed Asians as the “treacherous Siamese cats” in *Lady and the Tramp* that are “marked by the facial features, voice and accompanying music of the feline ‘Siamese twins’” (Byrne 95). In *Oliver and Company*, the Latino characters were the “irresponsible Chihauhaus” who robbed the local markets for food and hijacked cars. The movie, *Mulan*, also portrays China as the most sexist country in the entire world. Pettit continues his argument when he states that the cultural stereotypes are reinforced when Disney portrays “Arabs as barbarians in *Aladdin*, and Native Americans as savages in *Peter Pan and Pocahontas*.” Furthermore, persistent criticism of the song, *Arabian Nights*, which plays in the opening scene of *Aladdin*, led Disney to change the words. Disney ended up only changing one line of the song which originally read “where they cut off your ear / if they don’t like your face / It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home” (“Journal of Popular Film”). Whether or not Disney intentionally depicts racial tensions in their films, they certainly receive a large amount of criticism for seeming culturally insensitive.

Beyond the accusations of sexism and racism, Disney faces a much bigger criticism: their potential to rob children of their innocence. In an article on the “Politics of Disney” by Henry Giroux, he states that “childhood innocence is being eclipsed in contemporary American society” (21). Giroux believes that Disney has discovered a way to combine education and entertainment for children. Since Disney has become a virtual teaching machine, the people who encounter it on a daily basis become familiar with the values, ideas, and messages that the company displays. Therefore, Giroux concludes that “Disney wields enormous influence on the cultural life of the nation, especially with regard to the culture of children” (19). Vincent Faherty comments on the idea of Disney as a cultural pedagogue when he states that, “Disney’s impact is worrisome in view of its role as a major purveyor of the stories that will be used to construct children’s imaginary worlds as well as their notions of the real world” (24). Disney leaves no room for imagination in kids, because they load their productions with predetermined thoughts and opinions targeted towards children. Giroux argues that Disney not only prevents children from exploring the real world independently, but also “works hard to transform every child into a lifetime consumer of Disney products and ideas” (25). Children pressure their parents into purchasing their favorite Disney products, and Giroux believes that “As commercial culture replaces public culture . . . consumerism seems to be the only kind of citizenship being offered to

children” (24). The producers of Disney use the idea of innocence to downplay any criticisms because “innocence plays a complex role in the Disney Company’s attempt to market its self-image to the American public” (34). However, “there is nothing innocent about Disney when it comes to protecting its profits and corporate image” (54). Still, children are easily influenced and all of the ideas portrayed in Disney movies make a huge impression on their young and innocent minds.

The Disney Company proves its existence as an overwhelming part of American life. Even though it serves as a breakthrough in children’s entertainment, a company with worldwide recognition and influence can hardly be flawless. For as long as Disney has been alive, critics have discovered loopholes in the system that deserve proper examination. They specifically focus on the gender and cultural differences among the characters in the films because Disney specifically influences the way in which people, especially children, organize thoughts and feelings about a diverse world. Some people think that the idea of a corrupted children’s entertainment is ridiculous. However, Disney has an obligation to prevent as much public outcry as possible, which includes numerous critics. In the future, Disney will have to uphold a sense of responsibility to change the crooked aspects of the company if they expect to remain as an accepted and influential component of American society.

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