

Judith butler and gender theory in disney essay examples

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Judith Butler, in her book *Gender Trouble*, presumes that gender is not predetermined by sex, but instead is dictated by the gendered acts of people themselves. No universal gender exists, according to Butler; there is always a way to reinterpret and reassign behaviors to the masculine or feminine, and both biological men and women can exhibit male and female traits and identities. The assumption that there is an inherent identity of women as "female," according to Butler, is erroneous, and it does not need to be represented at all. No one can "be" a specific gender; it all lies upon a certain spectrum, and that spectrum lies at the heart of Butler's theories on feminism. Often, women are commoditized as sexual objects, as the male identity that is typically assumed creates an absence that can only be filled by women. In order to address these issues of oppression and hegemony, Butler advocates the dissolution or reconstruction of gender identities, and by removing our sense of gender with our sense of identity, a better sense of sexual politics can come of it (Butler, p. 146). The following will weigh this gender theory against the main characters of three classic animated films created by Walt Disney Pictures: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), *Hercules* (1997), and *Pocahontas* (1995). In these films, both traditional and nontraditional ideas of gender are perpetuated, as per Butler's ideas of what constitutes gender.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarves was Disney's first film, and the first to solidify the notion of the "Disney Princess." Disney Princesses are often the exemplified ideals of what American society at the time wishes to see in their women - they show patterns of behavior and principles that exist as evidence of what women are "supposed" to be. *Snow White*, in and of

herself, is a fairly passive character - she is virginal, beautiful, young, and apple-cheeked, with pale skin to denote her delicate nature. She is not necessarily averse to housework, and much of her existence lies in her status as a single princess, leaving a gap in her life to which a man will fulfill. At the beginning of the film, she is making a wish to ensure that her " prince will come" and sweep her away to a better life. The only skills she finds applicable are those of housework - when she first finds the dwarves, she is convinced that they need a mother figure to help them out, doing all of the cooking and cleaning for them. According to Butler's view that society determines the norms by which " masculinity" and " femininity" are defined, the world at the time of Snow White placed great emphasis on submissiveness and an obsession with domestic bliss. This is a decidedly anti-feminist tone, which emphasizes Snow White as the virginal, traditional ideal for women in the late 30s.

While Snow White exemplifies what " being a woman" is supposed to be in American Society, Hercules shows the traditional picture of what " being a man" is supposed to be. Hercules has superhuman strength, exaggerating the quality of men to be physically imposing and strong to its natural conclusion. Hercules' actions lie in the physical, as he performs feats of strength and physical prowess in order to gain the admiration of those around him (including the townspeople). Emotional and cathartic victories are won by Hercules through slaying of enemies, solidifying the aggressive nature of men and justifying these urges as natural and indicative of men. By killing the hydra and the cyclops, among other enemies, as well as punching

Hades into the Styx, Hercules (and any boy who watches the film) is shown that strength is the means by which men solve problems. Hercules' relationship with Meg, the love interest, places an interesting dynamic between love and strength, which ties in with societal ideas at the time of feminization of men through relationships with women. Meg is revealed to work for Hades, and as soon as Hercules falls in love with her, he is forced to give up his powers to protect her. If we follow Butler's notion of societal expectations determining gender, being a man like Hercules involves winning battles through physical strength and aggression, and emotional commitment to women threaten to take all of that away.

Finally, we get a slightly more nuanced and complex portrayal of women that do not fall into stereotypical gender roles with Pocahontas. The title character is a strong-willed, independent Native American woman who displays both the male-stereotypical aggressive tendencies and an active femininity that defies both gender expectations. Unlike Snow White, at the beginning Pocahontas is actively wishing to not be married to the "serious" warrior Kocoum. She wishes to maintain her autonomy and her agency, particularly after the English settlers arrive in the New World. When she encounters John Smith, she does end up falling in love, but this does not occur due to a perception of a void in the others' lives as Snow White did - they reach an understanding based on mutual appreciation of each other's cultures. Pocahontas has the same proactive nature that Hercules possessed, taking action in rescuing John Smith and stopping his execution. At the end of the film, Pocahontas and John Smith are still interested in a

romantic relationship but are separated, foregoing the 'happily-ever-after' ending typical of Disney films in general. In this way, this film subverts the Butlerian notion that society tells us to be together in traditional male-female relationships, as Smith and Pocahontas' romance is far from traditional. Smith is rescued by Pocahontas far more times than she by him; this is due to Pocahontas' assertiveness, confidence, and physical agility and skill not typically befitting the submissive girl figure of Disney Princesses.

According to Judith Butler, gender is not an inherent set of traits befitting certain biological statuses like male or female; instead, these traits lie along a spectrum, and can be exhibited in a number of different ways by both men and women. Most Disney films perpetuate very traditional ideas of man and woman, adding to popular culture and society's notions of what these terms are meant to mean. Snow White is a submissive housewife who longs for a man to take care of her; meanwhile, Hercules is an aggressive brute whose feats of strength define his agency. However, Pocahontas subverts these ideas by being a confident, assertive woman who displays both masculine and feminine traits, and does not define herself by her relationship status.

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