

The dominant theme of masculinity in the dan scanion's movie monsters university

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Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony in Monsters University

Monsters University shows a different representation of masculinity that needs to be acknowledged. The film challenges the hegemonic ideology of masculinity that many other Disney movies have presented through their lead male characters, including Gaston in *Beauty and the Beast* and Mr. Incredible in *The Incredibles*. Monsters University illustrates that masculinity should not just be represented by the physical appearance of a man, but by his qualities on the inside as well. Mike is the lead character in the film, and he is recognized as masculine for his bravery, leadership and fearlessness. Monsters University wants viewers to learn that Mike's qualities offer an alternative meaning of masculinity. However, the film still reinforces the idea that only male figures, not female figures, can be brave, fearless leaders.

Monsters University fits the theory of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci. According to John Storey, "the concept of hegemony is used by Gramsci (2009) to refer to a condition in process in which a dominant class does not merely rule a society but leads it through the exercise of intellectual and moral leadership" (83). The film leads viewers to accept the idea that only male figures can be brave, fearless leaders by challenging the hegemonic ideology of masculinity, which is male figures being physically strong. The film encourages viewers to follow the idea that men's physical appearance is not the only form of masculinity. Viewers might be satisfied with the new outlook on masculinity, but they do not realize that the film enforces the idea that only males can become brave, fearless leaders and not females.

Monsters University challenges the traditional idea of masculinity by focusing on a different representation of masculinity: leadership. Mike encourages Sully to believe that he can scare the humans and help the two monsters escape. Mike says to Sully, “ Let them [the humans] come! If we scare them, I mean really scare them, we can generate enough scream to power the door from this side! ... I’ve read every book about scaring ever written. This could work” (Scanlon 1: 15: 24 – 1: 16: 10). Then, when Sully doubts himself, saying, “ They’re adults. I can’t do this,” Mike insists, “ Yes, you can! Just follow my lead!” (Scanlon 1: 16: 11 – 1: 16: 33). This scene is significant because the small, helpless monster is leading the strong, muscular one; this proves that physical features do not make a leader. Thus, the film reassures viewers that a male figure can be a leader.

The film also identifies Mike’s fearlessness as a representation of masculinity. In the film, Sully gives a heart warming speech to Mike:

Mike. I don’t know a single scarer who can do what you do. I know everyone sees us together, they think I’m the one running the show, but the truth is... I’ve been riding your coattails since day one! You made the deal with Hardscrabble. You took a hopeless team and made them champions. All I did was catch a pig. Mike, you aren’t scary, but you are fearless. (Scanlon 1: 25: 10 -1: 27: 43)

This dialogue highlights the importance of being fearless. Mike still has value as a male figure, even though he is not traditionally masculine or physically scary. The film proves in this scene that a man can still “ be” a man without

looking similar to the traditional masculine man. Young viewers, especially boys, can learn that they should not worry about their physical appearance. This scene allows viewers to accept that being fearless can also be an alternative significance of masculinity.

The last quality that Monsters University focuses as a representation of masculinity is bravery. Mike stands up to the mean, stereotypically masculine monsters when they try to humiliate him and his team. Mike shouts, “ That’s enough! Stop making us look like fools! Just you wait until we beat you guys at the games” (Scanlon 1: 10: 00 – 1: 13: 12). This scene reverses the role of the masculine stereotype. Viewers can learn that the size of your appearance is not a determination of your bravery. With Mike’s size, many other Disney movies would have him be portrayed as the small and helpless man who needs someone big to stand up for him. An example of this would be in The Lion King, where Timon and Pumba needed Simba to protect them from animals trying to eat them. In contrast to Timon and Pumba, Mike is small but brave.

Monsters University is a great movie because of its alternative representations of masculinity. However, the film wants viewers to categorize leadership, bravery, and fearlessness with only male figures. In the film, there is only one group of females out of the multiple groups of males competing to become the scariest monster. The females lose in the first round of the competition and a male monster shouts to them, “ You ain’t cut for this, females!” (Scanlon 1: 35: 34 – 1: 40: 13). Here, the film indicates that females cannot be strong, brave, or leaders. This should concern

viewers who worry about the continuing harmful perceptions of women because these perceptions of women create assumptions about the qualities that women should have.

The film wants viewers to believe that it is counter-hegemonic. According to Lenny Flack, “Counter-hegemony refers to attempts to critique or dismantle hegemonic power” (7). The film shows an alternative representation of masculinity by having a small character become masculine through his traits. Viewers might accept the changing representation of masculinity, but they do not realize that at the same time, the film reinforces the idea that females cannot be brave, fearless leaders. In addition, while many fans of Disney may assume that the corporation seeks to inspire them with films like *Monsters University*, this corporation does the opposite.

Disney films like *Monsters University* may seem to teach values, but this corporation is looking for profit. According to David Anderson and Kevin Tavin:

Disney signifies a special place of celebratory play and uncomplicated amusement. In addition, Disney acts as a register for a golden age of innocence. When it comes to corporate power, however, most people think of Enron, Exxon-Mobil, or General Electric. They do not usually identify Disney as multi-billion commercial entity. Because individual gain is the prevailing ethos of most corporations, power is used to maintain the status quo and keep it running with as little friction as possible... this translates to corporations helping to construct a world-view where alternative images and

ideas that critique and challenge the dominant culture are relegated to the fringe. (22)

Many people do not realize that Disney is a part of a dominant class trying to take advantage of the value system and seeking to control society as a whole. This is because the corporation negotiates with viewers on their beliefs and values. Unfortunately, many viewers may not acknowledge the true intentions of Disney, which are leading viewers to accept hegemonic ideals. Therefore, it is important to analyze the functions of films like *Monsters University*, because audiences can use this analysis to think about what they learn from the media.

Viewers should question *Monsters University* and other Disney films on their portrayals of men and women. Viewers are satisfied with the new outlook on masculinity, but the film still perpetuates a harmful perception of women. Women in the film are presented as weak and shallow, and they are not seen as a brave, fearless leaders. Viewers should take a second look at how genders are being portrayed in the media. The fact that the film presents male figures as brave and fearless and the female figures as weak and shallow leads viewers to assume that these are the qualities each gender should have. Thus, the film creates stereotypes and reinforces harmful gender expectations.