

Snow white and the
seven dwarves
disney animation
1937



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A fairytale is a short story designed to both amuse children and to convey basic morals and principles and give life lessons. Most of the fairytales that children are told today have been passed down through generations often dating back to the eighteenth century and before. Because of their early origins, female representation in fairytales is often archaic with females being portrayed as weak or submissive and often being objectified.

This representation of women is an accurate portrayal of how women were expected to behave and be treated at these times in history.

This construction of gender however, is not relevant to the social standards for women today so a problem is faced in that young children are being shown and taught these outdated gender ideals which go on to influence their future perceptions of gender roles.

The story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves dates back to the nineteenth century but the Disney animation was not produced until 1937. Disney's Snow white details the life of Snow White who, sporting the stereotypical image of beauty and child-like innocence is made to wear only rags and clean the palace by her wicked and powerful stepmother, the queen.

She is ordered to be killed by the queen because of her beauty but is set free by the huntsman because he cannot bear to kill something so beautiful. She seeks refuge amongst seven dwarves who try to keep her safe while the queen still plots to kill her.

After one the attempts it seems that the queen may have succeeded until Snow White is saved by the kiss of a prince. In the deconstruction of this plot <https://assignbuster.com/snow-white-and-the-seven-dwarves-disney-animation-1937/>

examples of Disney's sexism and gender stereotypes in the representation of female characters are evident. Take the stereotyped nature of the Wicked Queen's character and physiognomies. The Wicked Queen is seen to be an evil woman who is vain, selfish, jealous and conniving, all poor traits that are stereotypically associated with females and often in particular females in power.

This creates the illusion that women cannot handle power or that all women in power are intrinsically bad. On top of this, despite the fact that in the beginning of the story the Wicked Queen is 'the fairest in the land' in the Disney animation she is shown to wear an unflattering amount of makeup and have no hair, things that are not stereotypically considered to be classically beautiful. As well as this the Wicked Queen is far more 'cartoon looking' than Snow White. This not only sends out a strong message that beauty is good, as in Snow White's case, while ugliness is bad but also sets a standard for what beauty is and what ugliness is.

The contrast between the character of the Wicked Queen and Snow White gives a clear indication of the gender construction in terms of what are perceived as good traits and bad traits for a woman. The queen is a woman in power and in control of her own life however, she is given traits that are evil and yet stereotypically feminine such as her obsession with her appearance. If in the story of Snow White, the Wicked Queen were a man it would seem absurd for him to be so obsessed with his own appearance. It would also seem absurd for him to want to kill Snow White for being more attractive than him.

Men in fairytales are often constructed to be more involved with things such as power, money and land. Men in fairytales also kill their enemies in stereotypically masculine ways such as in battle or hand to hand combat. At the end of Snow White the seven dwarves are seen chasing the Wicked Queen up a rocky mountain where she falls and is left for the vultures to eat. This act is far more bold and heroic than the sneaking conniving methods the Wicked Queen uses to try and kill Snow White. The fact that the Wicked Queen is constructed in this gender biased way gives a strong message to the viewer that beauty is all that women care about and that evil women also possess these stereotypically feminine traits.

Snow White's character is distinctly contrasted to that of the Wicked Queen in almost every aspect however, they do have one common attribute which is the way in which they are constructed to act in purely feminine ways. Snow White is constructed to be the moral opposite of the Wicked Queen, displaying an image of what Disney believes is a socially acceptable way for a woman to behave. Snow White is portrayed as submissive and is rewarded for her obedience, beauty and domestic skills, spending the majority of her time within the private sphere.

These traits are all stereotypically associated with women and feminine behaviour. When Snow White runs off into the woods to escape her evil step mother she finds a little cottage in disarray, " You'd think their mother would have-" she says before being cut off, denoting that she believes the mother of the dwarves should have been cleaning their house, another example of gender stereotyping in this film. When the dwarves return Snow White

enacts the stereotypical motherly role by demanding that they all wash their hands.

This not only reflects a stereotypical portrayal of women, that they must look after men, but also of men, that they cannot look after themselves and need a woman to perform domestic duties. In a gender neutral reconstruction of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves domestic duties would be shared out evenly irrespective of gender. There would also be no assumption that the dwarves cannot clean their house or that they need a woman to clean it for them and roles such as domestic carer and breadwinner would not be assumed.

The construction of male characters in fairytales is often as biased and predisposed as that of females. Men in fairytales are often shown to be physically apt and powerful and in the case of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves particularly superficial. When the large, strong huntsman is sent into the forest to kill Snow White he is only stopped because of her immense beauty suggesting that if it weren't for Snow White's physical attributes he would have completed his task of killing her. The broad-shouldered prince in Snow White and the Seven Dwarves is also perceived to be very emotionally shallow claiming to be in love with Snow White after having exchanged only a few words with her.

This suggests that it is not her intellect or personality that he is in love with but her physical characteristics. If the story was written to exclude gender bias the huntsman and the prince would be far less stereotypically depicted in both appearance and mannerisms. They would not be depicted as large, strong, square-jawed men and they would not revere beauty so highly or

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objectify Snow White. Twice when Snow White is tricked by the Wicked Queen she is saved by male characters. In the first instance by the dwarves and in the second instance by the prince who kisses Snow White to save her. This implies that women need men to save them and that without a man's love a woman is nothing.

In a gender neutral reconstruction of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves the male characters would not assume the role of the rescuer or protector and Snow White would not assume the role of the defenseless beauty waiting to be rescued. The passivity of Snow White's disposition is a critical element of her character. Snow White displays passivity when the huntsman takes her into the forest to kill her and she doesn't attempt to escape.

Snow White is reliant on men to save her and she is consistently rewarded for her dependence. Another illustration of Snow White's passivity is her consistent reliance on the seven dwarves to keep her safe, knowing full well that the Wicked Queen is attempting to kill her. The most prominent example of Snow White's passivity is in how she is to lie down to sleep until her prince awakens her. Snow White's passivity and the constancy with which she is rewarded for it gives the viewer the notion that Disney endorses this weak, helpless female stereotype and disapproves of women taking a more proactive approach in their lives and within the public sphere as the Wicked Queen does.

If the gender bias was eliminated from Snow White and the Seven Dwarves proactivity in women would not be shunned while passivity would not be rewarded. Snow White would be more pre-emptive in trying to escape from the huntsman and maintain her safety and would be more proactive in <https://assignbuster.com/snow-white-and-the-seven-dwarves-disney-animation-1937/>

finding her own happiness and refuge instead of waiting to be saved. When Snow White is awakened by the prince and he professes his love for her he immediately lifts her up onto his horse and they ride away to be married after waving goodbye to the dwarves. This transaction is done without a word from Snow White whose consent seems to not have been considered in the slightest.

The fact that Snow White is never asked for her vocal consent in going away with the prince gives a dangerous message to young viewers- that women are always willing and that their consent doesn't actually matter. The handing over of Snow White from the care of the dwarves to the care of the prince is almost ceremonious and gives the illusion that women should not for a moment be without the care of men. If Snow White and the Seven Dwarves excluded gender bias Snow White would be given time to consider the prince's offer and respected and not resented if she chose to decline his advances.

Overall, the key points that would need to be changed for the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves to eliminate gender bias would be the objectification of Snow White that is depicted throughout the film and most notably when the dwarves display her body in a glass coffin for all to see. The rewarding of stereotypically passive feminine qualities such as domestic skills, beauty and innocence and the punishment of aggressive feminine qualities such as vanity, jealousy and greed as well as the denouncement of women in power.

The representation of men would also have to be changed altering them from physically stereotypical males with stereotypically male mannerisms

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who need women to perform their domestic duties. They would also need to be depicted as less emotionally shallow, and be depicted as valuing women for their skills and personality, rather than just their physical attributes. All in all Snow White and the Seven Dwarves displays many forms of sexism and gender bias including gender stereotyping, the objectification of women and gender role assumptions within the private and public sphere.

This creates a poor example for children as they learn which behaviours are socially acceptable by mimicking things they see. To set a better example to children Snow White and the Seven Dwarves can be reconstructed to eliminate the ubiquitous elements of gender bias and stereotyping that are displayed. Then and only then will we begin to see a change in the way children learn to perceive the differences between the sexes and the abilities, characteristics and wants of both. By Isabella Flachsenberger Gower.