

# [The disney princess dilemma](https://assignbuster.com/the-disney-princess-dilemma/)

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Their stories are known all around the world and told through generations, in countless languages, books, and movies. Princess culture has become a growing phenomenon in the past fifty years, especially in the United States and Western cultures, thanks toDisney. Little girls everywhere want their rooms painted pink and to wear big dresses, glittering heels, and crowns of fake gemstones on Halloween. While there is nothing wrong with these gender discriminations (after all, boys like blue and want to dress up like scary creatures or villains), there is a grave distinction between princess culture and princess play. Encouraged by parents and other adults, the princess stereotypes (perfect endings, beauty, and the woman’s purpose) are detrimental when they become a framework for life rather than just a game of imagination and wonder.

The all-too-familiar ending phrase ‘ happily ever after’ seems to find its way into every fairy tale (only second in frequency to its sister phrase ‘ once upon a time’). Though the predecessors to Disney’s fairy tales (such as the Grimm brothers’ stories) did not end so peachily, Disney has taken the liberty of creating movies that follow similar plot lines: “[they] almost always have a sad beginning, an overbearing female villain, and the end is a predictably happy one. The Prince usually saves the day and makes the victimized young beauty into a Princess,” says Dina Goldstein. Goldstein is the artist behind the works entitled Fallen Princesses, which–in the artist’s own words–“[juxtapose Disney’s perfect Princesses] with real issues that were affecting women around [her], such as illness, addiction, and self-image issues” (Beck). Goldstein is not the first woman or artist to wonder about what happens after the ‘ happily ever after,’ but her bold artwork brought this issue to light for many. Adults know that real life does not play out like these fantasies do, but children do not.

While children are growing, their first ideas of life are also forming. It is up to parents at this stage to remind their children that these fairy tales are, after all, just stories. Parents object to the idea of Disney Princesses affecting their children’s lives, claiming that their little girls are “ just enjoying well-told, satisfying stories that feed their young fantasies” (Tapson). It is true that the world needs more imagination. People often complain about the lack of innovation plaguing the United States when they scold their own children for thinking differently than the social norm (wearing a sock as a hat instead, for example). It is in these areas of everyday life where parents should be encouraging their children to use their imaginations.

Playing pretend is vital for broadening the mind; however, when this ‘ play’ becomes an active part of children’s lives the line between reality and pretend becomes more and more blurred. Eventually, if told long enough they are princesses or royalty, these children may come to believe that they must fulfill the narrow parameters defining a princess: beauty, looking for their prince, and rich. Though the stories are inherently unique, all Disney princesses befit the beauty standards of their time. Anastasia is arguably the only big-name, animated princess who dresses in an outfit that has no figure–only because she is not a Disney creation. From Snow White with her dark hair and pale skin to Rapunzel with her tanned skin and huge eyes, one can see a huge gap in the standard of beauty in America between the time of Disney’s first princess animations to its most recent.

The princess’ outfits, too, are more likely to follow the fashions of the era in which they were made rather than the era in which they took place (take, for example, Ariel’s wedding dress with its trademark 1980’s poof sleeves). But all princesses are undeniably skinny but still with a figure and relatively large head, while all villains are always fat or anorexic-looking in comparison. Disney is not exactly known for its accurate proportions, though (for instance, Gru from Despicable Me). These caricature-like exaggerations are always done for a reason in movies: usually to add humor but, in the case of princesses, to make them even more unrealistically good-looking. It may not matter in other animated movies that the characters are grossly out of proportion, but for girls who look up to Disney princesses as role models and in a world where the average size of women is fourteen, this difference can be detrimental to the girls’ image of themselves. Supporters of Disney princesses point out that these women are courageous and kind, making them virtuous role models for young children.

Certainly, the world would be a better place if everyone showed “ kindness… compassion… intelligence… humility… courage… and determination” (Tapson). Disney also has certainly improved the character of its princesses over the years, transitioning them into more independent and free-thinking people. However, these moral standards also come at a cost: the princesses are always looking for a prince and, though kind, some of them can also be described as placid. Children, ideally, would not absorb the storyline of the princess movies but, rather, their moral lessons. Try to recall some of each, though. Storylines are usually more memorable, especially the climaxes where usually the princess makes a mistake (such as when Ariel from The Little Mermaid sold her voice for love) and not the themes made clear by the end of the movie (though The Little Mermaid’s message was ambiguous because selling her voice did allow her to find love when they would have never fallen in love otherwise).

Recently, since Mulan and Pocahontas, “ the idea of Disney princess has been permanently altered… [and] the era of the helpless damsel seems to be over” (Hugel). Problems still persist, though, and no princess movie has been perfect in its portrayal of women. From the very start of Disney’s animations, the woman’s purpose has been set out very clearly: wait for a prince to come and save you. This is evident both in the ending of these fairy tales (the bride and groom riding off into the sunset or else preparing for a happy life together) and the complete lack of interesting characters about the princesses themselves. What did Snow White, Jasmine, or Aurora do all day? None of them have talents or hobbies. Not like Queen Elizabeth the I who “[spoke] six languages and… restored order to her kingdom” (Beck).

The age of early princesses is a worrying matter, too: most were sixteen and Snow White was fourteen. However, the aforementioned progression of Disney princesses over the years has brought with it a new but subtle meaning to the woman’s purpose. With Brave (which focused on family rather than romantic love) and Frozen (in which Elsa exclaims that her sister cannot be in love with a man she just met) as mold-breaking examples, it seems that Disney will finally abandon its old way of making princesses for a new, independent, heroic model. This change also brings with it the abandoning of old, ‘ classical’ princesses for ones that Disney created solely for its movies (with Rapunzel from Tangled being the exception, of course). These new princesses are also an age for finding ‘ true’ love or going on dangerous adventures that is more suitable for our culture today (they are starting to be around eighteen or so), but they all still have young faces so as not to lose the attraction of young girls.

It is easy to understand why parents objected over the change Disney made to Merida to ‘ pretty her up’ when they officially added her to their collection of princesses. She has been the first and so far only tomboy-like princess and a role model for girls who did not like pink, tulle, and sparkles. Such girls can now fit in with other princess-playing peers while still retaining their own identity (a vital part of their healthy development) and not feeling as though they have to change themselves the way Disney tried to change Merida. Though their are many issues that Disney has left unaddressed, they are on the road to improvement. Princess play will still be a popular thing for little girls to do for a long time to come. Parents must be responsible, though, to keep these games fantasy and not real life.

Not every girl is a princess if ‘ princess’ means they must be rich and conventionally beautiful. As Andy Hinds said, “ Regardless of the more recent generations of empowered princesses in Disney movies, the overall princess trope promotes traditional notions of femininity and an unhealthy focus on physical beauty” (Hooda). However, many campaings nowadays are redefining ‘ princess’ to be a term synonymous with ‘ girl,’ saying that every child is special, smart, and deserves to be treated right. Disney’s princesses do portray many good traits, but in the older ones especially, there is sometimes nothing remarkable about them. They have no hobbies and only dream of finding a prince, which should not be the message that little girls take away from the movies and apply to their own lives. Works Cited: Beck, Koa.

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