Portrayal of Women in Disney Movies: Analytical Essay on Snow White’s and Mulan's Beauty

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs – based on one of the famous Brother Grimm’s tales – was released in 1937, costing 1.5 million US dollars, and is Disney’s first full-length animated feature. The movie was first known as “Disney’s Folly” since many doubted that the audience would sit through a whole animated movie (Wasko, 2001, pp. 14, 129). It would have to be a film that children would enjoy enough to sit still for almost ninety minutes and that adults would find engaging enough to sit through with them. The adults, after all, controlled the money, and these were Depression years when little was left for family diversion. (Inge, 2004, p. 138) However, when the movie had collected 40 million US dollars in less than eight weeks in 1987 – during the film’s 50th-anniversary re-issue – the film’s success became not only clear but phenomenal. “Disney considered Snow White to be the perfect narrative, replete with humor, romance, and pathos. […] Disney adapted the story of Snow White to suit an American audience” (Wasko, 2001, p. 129).

The movie centres around a beautiful orphaned young princess. Snow White charms everyone she meets and even the magic mirror refers to her as the one with “hair as black as ebony, lips as red as the rose, skin as white as snow – she is the fairest of them all” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). However, her stepmother, the evil queen, cannot bear the fact that somebody could surpass her own beauty, so she makes the princess wear rags, in hope that it will cover her beauty. One day, when she asks her magic mirror who the fairest in the land is, he answers that it is her stepdaughter. The furious queen commands the huntsman to kill Snow White and bring her the princess’ heart as evidence. The sympathetic huntsman, however, lets the young girl flee and brings the queen the heart of a pig. With the help of animals, Snow White seeks refuge in an old cottage that turns out to be the home of seven dwarfs, who work as diamond diggers. To stay with the men, Snow White happily accepts the role of a housewife. In the meantime, the young prince, who has met the princess once before and was so astonished by her beauty, is searching for her. Later, when the queen finds out that her stepdaughter is still alive, she turns herself into an old and hideous peddler and gives Snow White a poisoned apple, in which the princess bites and falls into a deathlike state. Only true love’s kiss can awaken her, which the prince volunteers to give and Snow White awakes and happily marries her saviour (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). “Lips, red as the (sic!) rose. Hair, black as ebony. Skin, white as snow” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937) is how the magic mirror describes Snow White’s appearance.

The princess is portrayed as a 14 years old girl with a small stature and a little curve on the hips. Clearly, the main “issue” (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 64) of the story is centred around beauty (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 64). This is made evident at the beginning of the movie when the following is being narrated: Once upon a time there lived a lovely little Princess named Snow White. Her vain and wicked stepmother the Queen feared that someday Snow White’s beauty would surpass her own. So she dressed the little Princess in rags and forced her to work as a Scullery Maid. (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937) The protagonist’s prodigious beauty is once again noted when the dwarfs want to kill the intruder who dares to sleep in their little beds. However, when they remove the blanket, they are so astonished and in awe of Snow White’s beauty that they conclude, it would be a great pity to kill her and therefore choose not

to do so. Furthermore, after she ate the poisoned apple, the dwarfs do not bury her since she is “so beautiful, even in her death, that the dwarfs could not find it in their hearts to bury her” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). Concerning her characteristics, Snow White is portrayed as a submissive woman that does not talk back, which is insinuated when she does not defend herself against her stepmother’s mistreatment of her and rather does what she is told to do.

This portrayal depicts that “good women do not talk back nor speak their mind” (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 66). Additionally, while completing any task, the protagonist sings and claims that “with a smile and a song […] your cares fade away” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937), indicating that women love music and even in challenging times, they just need to sing to forget their worries. One of Snow White’s characteristics is her diffidence as shown at the beginning of the movie. Right after she sings about marrying a prince, a prince approaches her, and she prudishly races into the castle. Moreover, she is so gentle while running, talking, walking, and crying that even timid animals, such as deer and rabbits, approach her and enjoy her company. Snow White’s kindness and graciousness have even saved her from the huntsman, who could not kill her when he realizes how sympathetic she is to animals, especially when she comforts and helps a lost bird. These portrayals of Snow White implicate that a woman is presumed to be compassionate, shy, kind, and gentle most of the time (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 66). Moreover, the protagonist is portrayed as innocent and naïve (Wasko, 2001). Therefore, she trusts everyone without worrying about it. Her innocence is emphasized throughout the whole film when she trusts the animals to show her a place to stay for the night, when she cleans and cooks for the unknown owners of the house, or when she accepts the apple from a total stranger for instance (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 66f).

Furthermore, it has been observed that the female characters in this movie conform to traditional gender stereotypes. For instance, Snow White not only cleans and scrubs her castle because her stepmother tells her to do so, but she also takes care of the cooking and cleaning in the dwarfs’ house. These are tasks women are limited to doing due to their gender. Snow White mistakes the dwarfs for children and says to the animals: “They’ve never swept this room. You think their mother was…maybe they have no mother” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). Snow White realizes that the residents of the house must have no mother because it is dirty and cluttered. Her reaction indicates that if a mother was present, there would not be such a mess. Traditionally, it is a mother’s duty, as a woman, to clean the house. “Another gender role portrayed by Snow White is women’s femininity” (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 72) which is shown when the protagonist picks flowers and sings but also the way she moves is considered very feminine (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 71f). Snow White is also depicted as inflexible to the situation she is in, as evinced in the scene where she asks the animals for a place to stay while pointing out that she cannot “sleep on the ground […] or in a tree” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). This scene portrays a woman’s incapability to adapt to a situation she is faced with and thus indicates that women are not resilient which confirms the stereotype that women need security (Gamboa, et al., 2014, pp. 67, 72).

Later, this characteristic is made even more evident when the dwarfs allow Snow White to sleep in their beds while they themselves sleep in pots, on the ground, and even in drawers – suggesting that men can adapt better to situations than women and are therefore more resilient. Nonetheless, Snow White takes over the role of a mother, treating the old dwarfs like children when she gives them kisses on the forehead before they go to work or tells them to wash their hands before eating – just like a mother would (Inge, 2004, p. 141). Apart from having motherly

character traits, she also seems to be a hopeless romantic, believing in wishes and dreams, and being “a woman who waits for her true love” (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 68). This is shown at the beginning of the movie where she fetches water from the well and talks to the birds “Want to know a secret? Promise me not to tell? We are standing by a wishing well” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). After that, she proceeds to sing: I’m wishing, I’m wishing. For the one, I love to find me. To find me, today, today I’m hoping, I’m hoping. And I’m dreaming of the nice things The nice things he’ll say, he’ll say. Another scene that depicts the protagonist’s dream that one day she might be saved by a prince from her misery is when the dwarfs ask her to tell a story; She sings a song about her dream that someday, her prince, whom she has met just once in her life, will come and save her: “Someday my Prince will come. Someday we’ll meet again. And away to his castle we’ll go to be happy forever. […]

Someday when my dreams come true” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). This characteristic of hers causes her to believe the peddler’s story that the apple is a “wishing apple” and would grant her a wish. As a consequence, she wishes: “he will carry me away to his castle and we’ll live happily ever after” and bites into the apple (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). “These scenes forward the stereotypes that women have nothing in their mind but the thoughts of their ideal man” and portrays that women are “hopeless romantics”, who would do anything to obtain a happy end (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 68). Further, it implies that a woman “is only complete when she finds and gets her man” and that women need men to guide them through life, since they, as women, are powerless (Diman, 2014). “Disney had set a standard of beauty” (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 64): The Queen, Snow White’s stepmother, is also described as beautiful. She is portrayed as a grown woman and like her stepdaughter, she has black hair – that is hidden under her crown – and white skin. She has got an angular face and arched eyebrows. The antagonist’s body figure is “voluptuous” (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 64) and even though there is no mention of her age, she is old, given her voice (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 64). Her beauty was beaten by Snow White’s as she becomes old. The picture painted in this film suggests that beauty comes with young age, and that old people’s beauty is subordinate to that of the young. It further suggests that older people should make more efforts to look young forever so that they’ll be hailed as beautiful. (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 64) As for the Queen’s personality, she is described by the dwarfs as being “wicked […] bad […] mighty mean […] [and] an old witch […] [who] knows everything. She’s full of black magic” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 1937). Furthermore, she is greatly concerned with her looks and determined to get rid of anyone who surpasses her beauty, thus indicating that “women are vain and are often jealous with fellow women’s physical beauty and would go to great lengths just to be hailed the most beautiful” (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 69). However, she is also independent, strong, and fearless (Davis, 2007, p. 107). When the antagonist goes to kill Snow White on her own because her huntsman failed to do so, she disguises herself as an old peddler.

The fact that she deliberately chooses to kill the princess in the form of an old and ugly lady, confirms the “Beauty-Goodness Stereotype” (Bazzini, et al., 2010, p. 2687) stating that what is beautiful is good and what is ugly, therefore must be evil. This depiction is very common in animated Disney movies (Bazzini, et al., 2010, p. 2687f), indicating that Disney’s standard for women is that a pretty woman is young, submissive, and thus is good while women who are strong and independent are undesirable and evil (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 74). After all, the Queen and Snow White have similar physical traits but Snow White has characteristics like “passivity” and “emotionality”, while the antagonist is assertive and intelligent (Davis, 2007, p. 125). Moreover, although the Queen and the old peddler are the same person, in a child’s eye

it is nonetheless the old, hideous witch who handed the princess the poisoned apple. Already at a young age, children take notice of such stereotypes: Indeed, children in the current study reported an overall greater desire to befriend an attractive peer and rated the child as more likely to be desired as a friend by other children, less likely to get into trouble, and nicer, relative to an unattractive peer. (Bazzini, et al., 2010, p. 2704) Furthermore, Snow White's stepmother is portrayed as a "femme fatale" (Bell, 1995, p. 115) like many female Disney villains, which "is evident in the careful cosmetics of paint, cowls, jewelry, and 'clinging black dresses'" (Bell, 1995, p. 115). Additionally, the evil Queen is the only one in the movie who addresses the audience when she hopes that Snow White will be buried alive. She does that to confront the viewers, who hope the protagonist's well-being (Bell, 1995, pp. 115-118). In addition, premature burial is "one of the basic human fears" (Inge, 2004, p. 139) and children will probably associate that fear with the old witch. In the end, the antagonist falls off a cliff and dies, while being chased by Snow White's helpers, the dwarfs. This happy ending promises the viewers that goodness always prevails over evil (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 74)."The theme of these wicked women and their fates is not only that evil never goes unpunished, but also that it is the evil women – the bitches – who are the strong, active, no-nonsense people who stop at nothing to get things done" (Davis, 2007, p. 107). Apart from the fact that they have bad intentions, of course, it is nevertheless interesting that those who are depicted as active and take fate into their own hand, are the evil women and their activeness is "forced upon them by their jealousy and unhappiness" (Davis, 2007, p. 108). This unhappiness, however, does not result from a lack of beauty, since the Queen, for instance, is very frustrated and unhappy, even though she is only "second in beauty" to the protagonist. "Instead, real happiness seems to be linked to one trait alone – passivity. If you are willing to wait patiently for your happiness, it will surely come to you.

Try to make it happen for yourself, and you will only end up defeated and alone" (Davis, 2007, p. 107f). The Queen is not only portrayed as "vain, jealous, tricky, wicked, bad, mighty mean, [an] old witch, […] full of black magic" and "determined to achieve [her] goal" (Gamboa, et al., 2014, p. 71), but also as being so jealous that she turns insane and is even willing to murder her stepdaughter to remain the fairest of them all. "Evil in Disney is not just meanness – it is a symptom of madness" (Davis, 2007, p. 109). This madness of evil is also depicted in the next movie that will be discussed. However, it is portrayed in the form of war. A number of changes in the 1990s affected its animation department. Younger talent at Disney and an increase in the number of women in higher-ranking positions […] undoubtedly influenced not only the kinds of female characters the studio chose to portray but also the way these portrayals were shaped. (Davis, 2007, p. 170) (See chapter 2.3) The film Mulan, based on a Chinese folktale, was released in 1998 when the image of a reputable woman in society was not limited to a housewife but extended to "the single career woman, the working wife, and mother, the single mother" (Davis, 2007, p. 169). Furthermore, the representation of women who were virtuous, good, kind, and aware of their own sexuality was beginning to arise. Particularly, television started featuring shows about successful and strong women (Davis, 2007, p. 169f) and Disney seemed to join the movement. (See chapter 2.3) In the movie, Fa Mulan, a Chinese teenage girl hopes to fulfil her traditional duty of being a desirable bride to "bring blessings on her home" (Mulan, 1998). Thus, she goes to the matchmaker, who judges and fails her. Meanwhile, the Huns are attacking China.

As a result, the Emperor orders that one man of every family should join the war. Since Mulan is an only child, her injured father must go to war, which would mean his certain death. Therefore, she decides to disguise herself as her father's son Fa Ping to take her father's place. Thereby

she risks her life since the penalty for her actions is death. Mushu, a little dragon and dishonoured guardian of the Fa family, secretly follows Mulan to protect her. During the tough training camp – led by captain Li Shang – several situations almost reveal Mulan's identity. The troops soon leave training camp to fight the Huns. Mulan's real sex is revealed when she receives an injury after saving Li Shang and succeeding the Huns – including their leader Shan Yu. Consequently, Shang decides not to execute her but to leave her to her destiny. Mulan witnesses some of the Hun army emerging from the snow and getting ready to attack again. Thus, she rides quickly to the Imperial City to warn them of the attack. While Shang and his troops are hailed as heroes for conquering the Huns, Mulan tries to tell people what she saw. Yet, nobody listens to her due to her gender. In front of everybody, the Huns kidnap the Emperor. Hence, Shang and three other men of the troop (Yao, Ling, Chien-Po) listen to Mulan's plan to disguise themselves as concubines. They manage to attack the Huns guarding the chamber, in which the Emperor and Shan Yu are. Shang comes to fight the leader while Chien-Po takes the Emperor to a safe place. When Mulan proves herself to be the soldier who defeated Shan Yu's army, she has his full attention and can lure him to the palace's roof, saving Shang's life once again. On the roof, Mushu launches an enormous firework rocket at the enemy, while Mulan distracts and fights him. Explaining that, despite her imposture, she saved the entire nation of China, the Emperor bows to her to show his respect. After being offered a position as the Emperor's council, Mulan respectfully declines, believing it is time to return home. As a result, the Emperor hands her his medallion and Shan Yu's sword as gifts to honour her family. At home, her father embraces Mulan, happy to see her safely returned. Shortly afterwards, Shang arrives at the Fa residence to return Mulan's helmet and happily accepts the invitation to stay for dinner (Mulan, 1998).