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The Ideal Princess, the Perfect Woman

The fictional princess character has been portrayed differently throughout many periods within cultures and the narrative has changed tremendously. The folklore model followed generations of repetitive stories that provided lessons, often moral, of do and do not to youth, which gave way to current royal character ideals of beauty, youth and knowledge formed and pedigreed within animation and film narratives. This paper examines current cultural expressions of the princess character contrasting idealized fictional models from mainstream films and other media forms to authentic royal ideals, emphasizing true royal princess models and characteristics versus illusory roles, and consistency of these roles within the ideal princess archetype and ideology despite narrative. For the purpose of this study the focus will be on mainstream film portrayals of Disney princess characters, Star Wars Princess Leia, and actual true royalty—Her Royal Highness, Catherine Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge, and Diana Spencer, Princess of Wales.

The illusionary model of the princess image morphs throughout culture, but changes very little in character narrative. This is especially noticeable in the Disney princess model; when we think of princess we imagine pink, big dresses, crowns, pretty and perfect features, with youth and innocence.

By 1934, Walt Disney and his team were beginning to dream the possibility of a feature length animated film into being [*The Goddess of Spring*, was released on November 3,

1934]...he wanted his forthcoming feature film's narrative to be drawn from...stories he was raised on and with which he knew his audience would be most familiar. Two of his favorite choices were the Brothers Grimm's *Snow White* and the myth of Persephone's abduction by Hades (Pearson).

This traditional Greek and fairytale look creates a physical stereotype that includes soft hair, flowing garments, pink and red lips or cheeks, and a wholesome physique.

Physical manifestations do not comprise the character solely, this template is further developed with the characters movements and actions, "Persephone...served as a sort of test run for *Snow White*...[and] features Disney's first realistic maiden twirling and flitting through an idyllic spring world, accompanied by dancing, dwarf-like figures, birds and fairies (Smithsonian)." This template becomes the Disney archetype for his female figures; young versus old, good versus evil, and naïve versus mature. An archetype, creates a pattern that is followed throughout the storylines Disney uses, "1. the original pattern, or model, from which all other things of the same kind are made; prototype; 2. A perfect example of a type or group (Webster's 72)." Disney develops positive characters that have similar dresses, voices, body compositions, playful actions, and back stories featuring individuals who come from challenging circumstances, that "rise from the ashes," despite the fact they are often, in the early stories, royalty.

Negative characters follow patterns as well, and tend to reflect sharper, darker images; females are curvaceous, body compositions reflect older body development—larger hips, fully developed breasts—and stature is often exaggerated. Body type remains consistent for older characters, positive or negative in terms of body language—they are women's bodies versus girl's bodies; defined with small breasts, long flowing hair, small face and large innocent "deer

in the headlights” eyes. Even non- human beings within the stories reflect this blueprint; Belle (*Beauty and the Beast*), is a petite, tiny waisted waif (human)—while the companions are characterizations of furniture—a stout round teapot, and the large, tall and chunky armoire, essentially the physique of an opera singer, boisterous, big boned and well built. Ariel mirrors identical Disney compositional elements parallel to other princesses, similar facial features, and a perfect proportioned human torso, even though she is a fish!

It is clear the physical manifestations of the Disney woman reflect the cultural climate and time they were created within, “Representations of women in Disney films are due partly to...Disney's personal feelings about family life...and partly to the fact that his attitudes mirrored the patriarchal cultural beliefs of the 1940's about what roles women should play in society (qtd. in Sawyer 2). The stories, or narratives, remain constant, posing good versus evil, and women that develop over time through their experiences. The look of the character changes, and while this model has been altered in appearance; 50's to 90's, reflecting the current period—Mulan, and Pocahontas (Asian, Native American) versus Disney's original white European models of Snow White, Cinderella, and Aurora—the storyline is seldom altered. “As they worked on Persephone's princess-like look and action, animators also developed standards... to keep character attributes consistent throughout the film (Smithsonian).” If at all, the physicality varies—dresses, names, places, and problems—however, changes never occur in the protagonist story arc, or ongoing storyline. You literally can plug one Disney princess into any of the films, no matter the timeframe or era.

This princess portrayal generally consists of two parts; a youth component, followed secondly by a growth element. This youth and growth storyline is actually not any different from most basic protagonist and antagonist plots—good versus evil; hence, Luke versus Darth Vader,

the Wolf and Three Little Pigs—but in Disney accounts the differences are gender related; Disney uses woman more often. This allows a creation of vulnerable, simple minded teenagers on the cusp of womanhood—who break out of their adolescent mentality and immature mold by becoming an adult individual. Love, trials, and tribulations allow her to fracture boundaries of her bond.

Girlish inquisitive young women have been central characters in the Disney mythos since the beginning. *The Goddess of Spring*, however, paves the way for Disney's version of one of humanity's central archetypal experiences: the maiden coming into a mature knowledge of self through trials, trauma, tenacity, and resurrection (Pearson).

Passive exit strategies, and minor friendships play more into the gender actions of the Disney princess storyline than fictional male counterparts, and their grandiose battle scenes.

The Disney Snow White character is inexperienced and demonstrates a lack of knowledge that leads her into a plight of not once, but twice nearly being murdered. This same youthful (immaturity) contributes to a growth pattern that includes two rescue scenarios—solely by beauty alone—once by the enamored Dwarfs, then eventually by the prince; whose kiss awakens her from an everlasting sleep, in which she is so attractively laid. A glance at the Disney character Cinderella repeats this theme in nearly the same makeup through look and plot. She is childish and innocent, assuming that she can go to the ball, as her sisters—in a clever metaphor, rip apart her dress—literally destroying her chances. Here once again Disney creates growth out of two rescue scenarios, brought about by a lack of maturity. The growth occurs by rejecting the current situation—essentially a “caged” servant role, and immature perceptions, like a dress will somehow empower her. Her first rescue occurs via her Fairy Godmother, followed by a second crisis, which leads to a princely meeting, second rescue, and creation of her “happy

ever after” life. In these examples—youth and immaturity, rescue, a male savior, an older individual imparting moral lessons, and ultimate love—create the Disney formula for grown-up women and their transformative processes.

This fictional “rescue” action of the princess has received much criticism, suggesting that women no longer need rescuing through the growth model portrayed in these earlier films. It is suggested that many of the current newer Disney characters are negating this “male rescue” model, but aspects of it remain woven within the narrative.

The most prevalent characteristic of Disney’s three original princesses (Snow White, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty) is that they spend much of their movies as damsels in distress, waiting to be saved by men...[In] 1989...Disney debuted *The Little Mermaid*’s Ariel, a princess less passive and more defiant. But Ariel also gave up her beautiful voice for a pair of legs just so she could be with a man — who, of course, is a prince who rescues her in the end. (Weston)

Disney’s *Mulan*, *Frozen* and Pixar’s *Brave* are all considered rejections of the previous “damsel in distress” model, but they still retain male attributes to plot or others characters that mirror previous films.

Disney’s *Frozen* has no traditional prince to rescue Anna and Elsa, but the two main components of youth or immaturity, and growth via “rescue” occur, and wisdom from an elder character is present. Anna is considered strong and brave as she attempts to find her sister (crisis #1), after her elder sister Queen Elsa teaches her a lesson in trust (the betrayal by the evil prince-crisis #2), and is rescued by Christof’s kiss of true love. This protagonist model features two female leads, challenging the earlier Disney princess model, but clearly still remains the standard

archetype of the princess character with Anna's lack of wisdom, naivety and youth—followed by the standard “rescue” plot and narrative, just as her princess predecessors.

The theme of wisdom and maturity is represented and introduced in the form of an elder female illuminating the concept of young versus old. It can be positive such as the Fairy Godmother (*Cinderella*), Mrs. Potts (*Beauty and the Beast*), The Three Fairies (*Sleeping Beauty*) and ironically, the older version of the sister, Anna, in *Frozen*. Positive representations may appear an older matriarch, in motherly form, with actions that evoke grandmotherly or tender parental guidance. Generally the evil component is harsher, threatening, more powerful, and reveals an experienced adult woman, whose maturity contrasts to the youthful vibrancy of the princess. In *Cinderella* we have the evil stepmother, who is portrayed as very mature physically and emotionally, but she cares very little for the protagonist Cinderella. The prerequisite evil Queen in *Snow White*, looks and acts exactly the same as does Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*—dark, powerful, enveloping Ariel with her tentacles—representing the ability to encompass the space, overpower the Princess, with disregard for human connection and love. Positive or negative, elders always follow the Disney template of reinforcing a moral lesson, or objective...be this person, not that person.

Growth occurs from wisdom exhibited through elders, but other positive characters can reinforce these same ideals. “They evolve into strong women through their unique stories of abduction into unexpected circumstances. And they rise, assisted by both their own strength of will and the transformative power of love. These mythic elements are fundamental to the Disney tradition (Pearson).” Love comes through as the ultimate power to reinvent themselves, and friendship plays a role in this; Snow White has the Dwarfs, Anna has Olaf, and Mulan has Mushu. In *The Little Mermaid*, we see a new elder character in Sebastian, the crab. Not only is

he male (similar to the Dwarfs), but Sebastian is an animal; important since these Disney depictions are true fairytales, where the objective is not in expressing accurate depictions of an animal and his traits. The intent is “dreaming” and “believing” using some aspect of the personality assigned to the character, creating a friendship that always results in guidance and education—providing a moral compass that points the princess to womanhood. Sebastian becomes a token elder in this case, through friendship, and is intended to be the exemplary ideal of the “parent” or adult in the *Ariel*’s life, without which she can never achieve said dreams or live “happily ever after.”

Disney is very successful in showing how much family and good friends should mean. Even though there is always someone that is evil towards the protagonist, they always have a steady support system of people that love and care for them. These family and friends are the main supporters of the princess’s and will help them overcome their troubles, or help save their lives in any way possible (Sawyer 7).

Growth occurs from the youth model to the womanhood model through relationships that shape the circumstances and situations—love encompasses lessons of friendship—you can’t go solo, don’t go there, you need a moral compass, and you need to be willing to change. If you follow these guidelines, you will be ‘happy ever after,’ thus a perfect woman, ideal princess.

We can look at other models of the fictional princess and find parallel character elements. Princess Leia, from the *Star Wars* saga, is generally regarded an opposite archetype to the standard Disney model, but further study reveals her character remains nearly identical. Leia fits the physical attributes of the Disney princess; she is young, very pretty, pink cheeks, red lips and wears a flowing dress. Her narrative is consistent to type as well, she is in need of rescue, she is powerless to escape Darth Vader, and is she unable to save her planet or family. Her youth and

tone of helplessness, is what leads Luke to seek Obi Wan Kenobi in order to come to her rescue. Even in the process of liberation, Leia seems to reject the rescue provided by Han, Luke and Obi Wan—yet, she cannot survive without the men’s help, nor is she capable of escaping due to her lack of flight and engineering knowledge.

Leia’s growth occurs as she lets the men save her, and her friendship and relationship with them allows her to embrace her full princess persona, a mature woman and ruler over the galaxy. She is not independently capable initially, due to her youth, and immaturity, and consequently her story arc follows the same exact female model as her Disney counterparts when she receives guidance from the “elder” character, seen here in Obi Wan Kenobi. Female or not these characters mirror the same narrative and personality throughout fictional storylines, whether the main protagonist is Luke or Aladdin—we see the same blueprint for the princess character in youth (immaturity), and growth (elder model support in order to aid in maturity) , always transitioning from “princess” or child to “woman.”

Analyzing this fictional princess model culturally it seems that the standard character should alter for each the period. Accordingly, Walt’s idealized code of beauty, and what it meant to be a modern woman in the 40’s and 50’s should have been completely different from the 21st century *Frozen*, or a fictional princess such as Princess Leia. In fact, these idealized character narratives are never really altered, but must keep in code with this standard storyline. Disney’s original concept prevails throughout fictional models, and defines the ideal, whatever the source, “Persephone might be a goddess, but she’s also the daughter of Zeus and thus a princess, as well—one who exhibits the same characteristics of curiosity, peril and redemption that her later sisters will mirror (Smithsonian).” Each idealistic standard character for a fictional princess is a

model of youth (yet beauty), and immaturity then growth (via the elder and evil elder character); a transformative process rejecting child-like existence to full womanhood.

Throughout most cultures, perceptions of beauty have been constant especially in regards to the ideal of feminine beauty; or beauty that is expected, however, unlikely achievable by most women. None more so than that of royalty—the Queen of England, the ultimate example—is matriarchal, powerful, possesses impeccable taste, and an intellect the height of female thought. The princess is the youthful counterpart to the Queen; young, beautiful, sexy, and generally examined with a physical lens. This juxtaposition of womanhood and beauty have been idealized for centuries, setting an unattainable physical standard for women, but also in reality placing focus on a social set of standards—labeling beauty as a title, ironically beyond the reach of any person without royal bloodlines. For example, little girls are labeled princess, although they possess no lineage or connection to an imperial household, which would make them, “. . .2. a non-reigning female member of a royal family. . .4. [or] the wife of a prince (Webster’s 1130).” This standard of beauty is relevant to our culture since this concept of princess is not only a fictionalized character, as already discussed—princesses are real.

Within this century the public has had the great honor of witnessing a fairytale come to life—watching Kate Middleton and Prince William meet, court, and marry in the most grandiose royal event—a fairytale storybook and film personified. This woman is queried and showcased at every moment; what is she wearing, what is her style, how much does she spend to look that way, who is her stylist, and is she a contemporary princess or traditional? Everyone watched and critiqued as she transitioned from commoner, to Her Royal Highness, Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge. Her title does not include the term princess, but she is allowed to use the title, since she is married to His Royal Highness Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, Earl of Strathearn and

Baron Carrickfergus (Beckford). At present, in Catherine, there exists a physical factual princess that mirrors and follows the Disney archetype previously discussed, as well as, the fictional ideal princess model.

Even the narrative arc of youth transformed with elder roles and rescue scenarios are echoed as Middleton is groomed into a true life titled role, framed through centuries of pedigree and training. Although the specific elder individuals are not directly defined, the corporate process of the royal institution she has joined dictate the boundaries of her lifestyle, essentially creating the narrative of her individuality. She looks different, behaves different, and responds differently than her commoner responses before marriage. Initially, she is obscured without this transformative maturing process; until then she does not exist—she is an ugly duckling—a *Cinderella*, or *Swan Lake* princess. Rescue comes in the form of the Prince, his act of marriage unveils the woman beneath, creating the perfect woman, a proper princess, valueless without title.

Middleton is not the first true princess fairytale in real life; we watched this occur between Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, and Princess Diana Spencer. Diana was married to Charles, thus becoming a princess by title. Diana's character was pedigreed and groomed after her marriage; despite this, the real Diana was a different person than the commercialized character portrayed in the mainstream culture at the time. She hated to be in the public eye, she never wanted to “dress the part,” and her children were of utmost importance to her—in opposition to the iconic role that the kingdom and her people come first. Eventually Diana rejected her label of princess when she divorced the prince, but culturally was still subjugated to the same behaviors and role, in spite of her lack of title.

These “true” characteristics are groomed and culturally bestowed onto these women, historically “granted” to them after inauguration of the princess title. These royal ideals are generally characterized in personality traits such as tenacity, decisiveness, maturity, wisdom; and suggest that these character traits do not exist without the title—even though in reality these virtuous women exist before the title is vested on them. Princess Diana was an advocate for many charities previous to obtaining a title; and following her marriage, interactions with these same organizations became a performance of sorts. Her personal character changes to approach these activities with her new title as a duty or job, even though in reality she was a philanthropist prior to her iconic royal role. The concept of true royalty needs to be reexamined, since it is claiming that the person witnessed in the public eye, and in the media, is correct and accurate to the factual individual, which historically can be argued. These depictions are manufactured icons, an ideal role, in flesh, that does not reflect a perfect woman, in reality—they are fictional creations of a silver of the truth.

To examine current cultural expression of “princess” is to truly discover a character made up to resemble a perfect idealized person—whether youth and beauty, or traits of tenacity and decisiveness—this is holistically a fictional character. Each royal ideal portrays a concept of female perfection which is not factually achievable. Therefore, “princess” is a just title, a word, or name and label of a type of idealized female that is not attainable—there is no difference between the true royal princess, and the fictional princess. They are roles and characters performed and created to portray someone who cannot exist; Disney calls them fairytales—girls need to dream big and can achieve anything they wish to, which is idealized in itself, as each princess is not capable without the help of others. “They” cannot achieve anything without the mature, experienced individual stepping in to guide them to success, including family or

unconventional friendships. The authentic princess has to achieve success within the culture set in front of her; she is not allowed to be who she wishes or divert from the preset iconic role, provided and maintained for her. The title tells her who she is now—a princess. With this character developed and groomed by both the fictional, and real model, just another stereotype has been furthered and marketed to portray something elevating, progressive and new, but factually the same consistency of the role and story (or what it truly means to be a princess) remains. All princesses have the same stereotypical look (they are all pretty), and story (they are all young and needing to grow), which is manufactured to a set character of perfection.

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