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# A Whole New World? The Evolution of Disney Animated Heroines from Snow White to Mulan

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**A WHOLE NEW WORLD?**

**THE EVOLUTION OF DISNEY ANIMATED HEROINES  
FROM SNOW WHITE TO MULAN**

**BY**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research study is to determine how the heroines of Walt Disney animated films have evolved from 1937 to 1998. A literature review and content analysis were performed on eight Disney heroines created during this time period. Conclusions were then drawn regarding how these heroines' goals, personality traits, physical appearances and worth relative to the plot of their films have evolved over the years. Furthermore, possible explanations were offered for why these characters are portrayed in such a manner, as well as what messages these portrayals may communicate to viewers.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Her long, black hair, tied in a loose ponytail, fell to her waist and gently swayed back and forth as she walked. Her golden hoop earrings and crimson lipstick glistened in the light. Her bare midriff was easily seen beneath her silky, shimmering, pale blue top and matching slacks. Her open-toed sandals offered the perfect finishing touch. Here was my five-year-old sister Michelle on Halloween night in 1994, dressed as Princess Jasmine from Walt Disney's animated motion picture *Aladdin*, grinning eagerly as she waited for us to take her trick-or-treating. She and my four-year-old cousin Jason, dressed as the film's title role, stole the show that night. While they both looked adorable, I could not help but stare at Michelle's costume, which was in stark contrast to the costume I wore when I had been her age. That year, 1988, I dressed as Snow White, from the Disney animated film of the same name. While Michelle's long, black ponytail hung loosely down her back, my hair had been pinned into a tight bun, accented by a cute, red bow. Michelle donned hoop earrings and open-toed sandals; I had worn tiny pearl earrings and ballet slippers. Michelle's clothing revealed her midriff and shoulders; my clothing, a blue and yellow dress complete with puffy sleeves, a red cape and a high, white collar, only revealed my face and neck. I contrasted our vastly different Halloween attire throughout the entire evening. It was the first time I questioned the similarities between the Disney heroines I had grown up watching and those of my sister's childhood.

Disney's animated heroines, including Snow White and Jasmine, have been gracing the silver screen since 1937, when Walt Disney's first full-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, was released. Since then, audiences all across the

country have fallen in love with these heroines, purchasing tickets to see them in theaters, as well as home videos and DVDs to see them over and over again at home. Parents fill their children's closets and toy chests with tee-shirts, costumes, dolls, posters, coloring books and other merchandise depicting their images. In fact, the Walt Disney Company's financial highlights specify that in 2004, studio entertainment and consumer products constituted close to 40% of the company's total revenue for that year (Investor Relations, 2004).

Given this constant mania of Disney animation, it is little wonder that children everywhere, especially young girls, are fascinated with these heroines. They sit at the edge of their seats as they watch films like *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid* and *Pocahontas*, wondering what will become of the animated beauty who has consumed their attention for the last 90 minutes. They fantasize about being lovely princesses whose dreams magically come true. The recent DVD release of *Cinderella* has only amplified the Disney heroine phenomenon. As Suzanne Brady says of her two-year-old daughter Reilly, "It's everywhere I turn, and she's obsessed with it. It's all about who has the nicest (Halloween) costume. Everyone is going to be Cinderella. It's who's got the tiaras, the dresses, the shoes" (Kantor, 2005, p.G1).

The enduring popularity of these fictional women prompts us to think about exactly whom our children are idolizing and emulating. The Walt Disney Company has long been considered a beacon of quality children's entertainment, but in the past two decades, the way in which the company has portrayed its animated heroines has been a subject of controversy. As suggested by the contrasting Jasmine and Snow White Halloween costumes that my sister and I had worn, Disney animated heroines seem to be

portrayed differently now than in 1937. Yet, might there be some characteristics and traits possessed by these women that have remained the same throughout the decades? How exactly are these women being portrayed? Why are they portrayed in such a manner, and what messages do their portrayals communicate to the children who obsess over them?

### **Thesis Question**

The following thesis question will therefore be the driving force behind my research: How has the portrayal of Disney animated heroines evolved from 1937 – 1998? I chose these specific years as the start and end points of my research, since 1937 marked the birth of the Walt Disney Company's first animated heroine, Snow White; in 1998, the company introduced us to its latest animated heroine, Mulan.

### **Subsidiary Questions**

These subsidiary questions represent different facets of the thesis question:

- What are the goals of each animated heroine? Do these goals differ for each character? Do these goals change throughout the course of the film? Does she achieve them? What are her motivations behind them?
- Does every heroine's journey end in marriage?
- Do these heroines passively accept the norms of their respective societies, or do they attempt to go against them?
- Do these heroines hold authoritative familial/societal status? Are they dominant or submissive characters?
- Are these heroines self-reliant or do they constantly need to be rescued?



- What is each heroine's worth, relative to the plot of the film? Is it her beauty or her actions/personality that drives the plot forward?
- How is each heroine depicted physically?

### **Heroines/Films Researched**

The following eight Disney animated heroines will be researched and analyzed throughout the course of the study:

- Snow White               *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937)
- Cinderella               *Cinderella* (1950)
- Briar Rose/Aurora       *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)
- Ariel                      *The Little Mermaid* (1989)
- Belle                      *Beauty and the Beast* (1991)
- Jasmine                 *Aladdin* (1992)
- Pocahontas               *Pocahontas* (1995)
- Mulan                     *Mulan* (1998)

### **Objectives of the Study**

By studying and analyzing these eight Disney animated heroines, I will determine how their portrayals have evolved from the first heroine to the most recent. This will then allow me to draw correlations about why they are portrayed in such a manner, as well as what messages the portrayals communicate to the millions of people who view them.

### **Limitations**

With its Touchstone Pictures and Hollywood Pictures divisions, its ownership of Miramax Films and its partnership with Pixar Animation Studios, the Walt Disney Company has entertained audiences with over 1,500 motion pictures over the past 80 years (Internet Movie Database). These films range from completely animated (i.e. *Pinocchio*) to completely live-action (i.e. *The Mighty Ducks*), from an entirely human cast (i.e. *Sleeping Beauty*) to an all-animal cast (i.e. *The Lion King*). Because this

research topic encompasses such a broad range of material, it was necessary to limit the study to a specific category of Disney films.

To ensure adequate pre-existing research and a solid, thorough analysis, I chose not to study short films (films that are shorter than 40 minutes in length) or films that lack a defined plot. Such motion pictures include *Mike's New Car*, a short film featured at the beginning of the full-length motion picture *Monsters, Inc.*, and *Fantasia*, a full-length compilation of animated shorts set to classical music. Because of the nature of these films, it is difficult to secure sufficient pre-existing research on them, since short films are not long enough to thoroughly analyze characters, and films without a plot provide virtually no opportunity for character analysis. I have also excluded direct-to-video films, such as *The Return of Jafar* and *The Little Mermaid II*. These films generally do not receive as much attention from the public, especially scholars, as theatrical films do. They, too, lack the pre-existing research needed for a solid analysis.

Other exclusions to the study are films in which the heroine is an animal (i.e. *Lady and the Tramp* and *The Rescuers*) and films in which the heroine appears to be younger than 15 years of age (i.e. *Lilo and Stitch* and *Alice in Wonderland*). These films are not included in the study to ensure that all heroines are of a similar nature and can therefore be legitimately compared with each other. While Disney's animal heroines do possess some human characteristics, they also, logically, possess those of animals as well, which makes them more difficult to compare with Disney's human heroines.

Lastly, to solidify the bases for comparison further, I will not include live-action films or films that are a mix between animation and live-action (i.e. *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Mary Poppins* and *Pete's Dragon*). Because animated films are not bounded

by the limitations of the real world, the Walt Disney Company is free to depict its animated heroines however it chooses. For example, if the company wants its heroine to have an extraordinarily tiny waist, rather than trying to find an actress that meets that qualification – and even then her waist may not be as tiny as the company would prefer – animators can create a heroine and make her waist as tiny as they would like. Everything in an animated film is there deliberately; the company purposely created the setting, the storyline, the characters’ physical and personality traits, etc. The portrayal of these animated heroines is a direct result of the company’s views regarding how the heroines *should* be portrayed.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms are assigned these definitions:

**Animation** – “An aspect of film making in which drawings or three dimensional objects are processed in such a way as to create the illusion of motion” (All Movie Guide, 2005).

**Climax** – “The ‘highest’ point of anxiety and tension for the audience where all of the complexities of the story-line meet” (All Movie Guide, 2005).

**Full-length** – Describes a motion picture longer than 40 minutes in length (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2005).

**Gender** – “The cultural and social basis of roles assumed daily by men and women” (Shields and Heinecken, 2002).

**Heroine** – “The major female character in artistic genres. Characteristically she is young and virtuous, and like the characteristics attributed to a hero, can be identified with and sympathized for by the audience” (All Movie Guide, 2005).

**“Newer heroine”** – The principal female character of a Disney animated film created after Walt Disney passed away in 1966. Newer heroines included in this study are Ariel, Belle, Jasmine, Pocahontas and Mulan.

**“Older heroine”** – The principal female character of a Disney animated film created during Walt Disney’s life. Older heroines included in this study are Snow White, Cinderella and Briar Rose/Aurora.

**Woman** – A female 15 years of age or older.

### **The Walt Disney Company: A Timeline**

To better compare and analyze Disney’s animated heroines, one must have a basic understanding of the company’s background. Below is a timeline (Walt Disney Company, 2004) of what I believe are milestones throughout the history of the company, complete with plot summaries of the films that are included in this study.

**1923** – Brothers Walt and Roy Disney form the Disney Brothers Studio and create a series of short animated films called *The Alice Comedies*.

**1928** – *Steamboat Willie* debuts, Disney’s first animated film with sound effects and dialogue. It also introduces the world to Mickey Mouse.

**1929** – The Disney Brothers Studio becomes Walt Disney Productions.

**1937** – *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney’s first full-length animated film, is released.

**Plot Summary:** Snow White is a young princess who longs to live happily ever after with the prince of her dreams. Jealous of her beauty, the Queen orders her huntsman to kill Snow White, but he cannot bring himself to do so. When he warns her to hide from the Queen in the forest, she stumbles upon the cottage of

the seven dwarfs, who welcome her into their home. When the Queen's Magic Mirror informs her that Snow White is still alive, she disguises herself as an old woman and tricks Snow White into eating a poisoned apple. The dwarfs discover the Queen and chase her to her death, then place the sleeping Snow White in a glass coffin. The prince later arrives and kisses her. She awakens and accompanies the prince back to his castle.

**1950** – *Cinderella* is released.

**Plot Summary:** Cinderella is a servant to her stepmother and two stepsisters. When they receive an invitation to the prince's royal ball, they leave Cinderella behind. Her fairy godmother arrives and sends her to the ball in a gown and glass slippers, but warns her to return home by midnight, when the spell breaks. She spends the evening with the prince, but as midnight approaches, she runs home and loses one of her glass slippers. The prince, determined to find her, orders that every maid in the kingdom try on the slipper, intent to marry the girl whom the shoe fits. When Cinderella tries on the slipper, it fits perfectly, and she and the prince marry.

**1959** – *Sleeping Beauty* is released.

**Plot Summary:** When the King and Queen present their new baby daughter, Aurora, to the kingdom, Maleficent, an evil fairy angered by the fact that she was not invited to the celebration, puts a spell on Aurora. According to the spell, Aurora would prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday and die. The three good fairies alter the spell, making it so that she falls asleep, rather than dies, and take her away with them to live in a modest cottage in

the woods in an attempt to keep her safe. Their plan fails; Aurora discovers that she is indeed a princess, and Maleficent leads her to a spinning wheel to carry out her spell. While Aurora sleeps, Prince Phillip discovers and kisses her. She awakens; they become romantically involved.

**1966** – Walt Disney passes away.

**1971** – Roy Disney passes away.

**1984** – Michael Eisner becomes CEO of Walt Disney Productions, which creates the Touchstone Pictures label.

**1986** – Walt Disney Productions becomes the Walt Disney Company.

**1989** – *The Little Mermaid* is released.

**Plot Summary:** Ariel is a mermaid who dreams of life as a human. After she falls in love with a prince whom she saved from drowning, she makes a bargain with the Sea Witch to become human and try to win the prince's heart, in exchange for her voice. She nearly succeeds until the Sea Witch intervenes and seizes Ariel. Ariel's father, the Sea King, gives up his crown in exchange for his daughter's freedom. As the sea is threatened under the Sea Witch's rule, the prince destroys her, and the King regains the throne. He transforms Ariel into a human, and she marries her prince.

**1990** – The Walt Disney Company creates Hollywood Pictures.

**1991** – *Beauty and the Beast* is released.

**Plot Summary:** Belle is a beautiful bookworm who wants more out of life than to be a simple townsfolk and swoon over the town heartthrob, Gaston. When her father is taken prisoner by a prince-turned-beast in a castle, she offers to take his

place. The beast is hopeful that he can learn to love her, and earn her love in return, as only this can break the spell and transform him back into a prince. The two despise each other at first, but over time develop feelings for one another. When Belle learns that her father has grown ill, the beast sets her free. Jealous of Belle's feelings for the beast, Gaston attacks the castle and mortally wounds the beast before plunging to his death. As the beast lies dying, Belle returns to the castle and confesses her love for him. This breaks the spell, and the two become romantically involved.

**1992** – *Aladdin* is released.

**Plot Summary:** Aladdin is a poor young man who dreams of being wealthy. Princess Jasmine, who resents the fact that she is being forced to marry, dreams of leaving her life as royalty. Aladdin stumbles upon a genie who grants his wish and turns him into a prince. He courts Jasmine, and the two fall in love. This angers Jafar, the Royal Vizier who wants to take Jasmine's father's place as Sultan. He finds the genie and reveals to Jasmine that Aladdin is a "street rat," not a prince. He uses the genie to gain power, which he then abuses. Aladdin later destroys Jafar, and the Sultan allows Jasmine to marry Aladdin despite the fact that he is not a prince.

**1993** – The Walt Disney Company acquires Miramax.

**1995** – *Pocahontas* is released.

**Plot Summary:** Pocahontas is an Indian princess who longs to choose her own path, rather than the path that has been chosen for her. One day, she meets John Smith, an English settler who has come to conquer Pocahontas' land and tame the

“savages” who live there. Pocahontas teaches John that he should view the land, people and animals as more than just property to claim. The two develop feelings for one another. When John is falsely accused of killing Kocoum, an Indian warrior, the tribe arrests him and plans to execute him. When he is about to be killed, Pocahontas saves him and professes her love for him. As the Indians and settlers begin to make peace, the corrupt Governor Ratcliffe aims to shoot Pocahontas’ father, but shoots John instead. Wounded, John must return to England and asks Pocahontas to go with him, but she declines, stating that her tribe needs her.

**1996** – The Walt Disney Company acquires ABC.

**1997** – The Walt Disney Company and Pixar join forces.

**1998** – *Mulan* is released.

**Plot Summary:** When the Huns invade China, the males of every Chinese family are called to fight. Because Mulan is her family’s only child, her injured father must enlist. She does not want him to further jeopardize his health, so she disguises herself as a man and goes in his place. She helps to fight off the Huns, but her true gender is eventually revealed. Though this would typically be cause for execution, the Chinese government spares her life and honors her because she has saved her Emperor and her country. She is then courted by Captain Shang, leader of the Imperial Army.

**2004** – Michael Eisner announces plans to retire as Disney’s CEO in 2006.

**2006** – The Walt Disney Company acquires Pixar.



## **Chapter II: Review of Literature**

To thoroughly analyze the evolution of Disney animated heroines starting with Snow White and ending with Mulan, pre-existing research on the topic was collected, studied and grouped into four categories: Goals/Motivations, Personality Traits, Worth Relative to Plot and Physical Appearance.

### **Goals/Motivations**

The goals of a Disney heroine offer a glimpse into her innermost wants and needs, as well as what she deems important in life. Many scholars believe that the ultimate goal of every Disney heroine is to earn a man's love. They say she is dependent on a man to be happy and fulfilled. One such scholar, Kathi Maio (1998), states that while Disney animated heroines may differ in terms of nationality and skin color, one thing remains the same: they are all "happy homemakers looking for a man" (p. 12). She believes that they exist in a state of suspended animation, emotionally dead until a man arrives to give them life; thus, they seek a man who can save them from their "dead" state. This is a formula that originated with Snow White, who obediently waits for her prince to come and take her away to his castle. It continues through to Ariel, who leaves her life as a mermaid to pursue the handsome Prince Eric, as well as Mulan, who enters the Imperial Army not to pursue her own ambitions, but to serve her patriarchal society (Maio, 1998). Though Maio's argument makes the seemingly valid point that the goals of these heroines revolve around men, it seems unlikely that all of them are natural-born "happy homemakers" (p. 12). According to scholars like Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (2004), many of Disney's newer heroines begin their films challenging society and authority, suggesting that they

are not content with the domesticated lives they have been instructed to lead and that they desire to make a change.

Brenda Ayres (1999) uses Snow White to illustrate Maio's claim that all Disney heroines are "dead" until they unite with a man. Snow White's goal, according to Ayres, is to create a nuclear family by marrying her prince and having his children. The focus of the film is a young woman coming into maturity, says Ayres, but Snow White strives to become mature for the sole purpose of becoming a wife, and later, a mother. She channels her desire to become a mother into her interaction with the seven dwarfs. She treats them not as the adults that they are, but as young children, cooking their meals, instructing them to wash before supper and kissing them on the head as they leave for work.

She further defends her argument with symbolism from the film. Ayres notes that Snow White, who is without a husband, is left enclosed in a glass coffin after eating the poisoned apple. She appears cold and lifeless. Like Maio, Ayres believes Disney's message is this: women with no husband or family are dead inside. The only antidote for Snow White is the prince's kiss, just as the only antidote for women with no families is union with a man. This is a strong argument for this particular film, especially given the fact that the Queen also lacks a husband to "protect her" and is subsequently killed. However, some would argue that the view that women are emotionally dead until they find their significant other is not always true. Regina Bendix (1993) believes that heroines like Ariel, who spiritedly and aggressively challenge authority at the start of the film, become naïve and helpless when they find their true loves, assuming traditional roles and abandoning their unique quests for adventure and autonomy. They become just

as lifeless when they find their men as they were spirited and adventurous when they were single (Bendix, 1993).

Erin Addison (1995), whose focus is *Aladdin's* Princess Jasmine, also believes the goal of Disney's women is to be coupled with a man. Addison identifies Jasmine's goal as freedom from the system in which she feels trapped. As a princess, she is forbidden to venture beyond the palace walls and must marry an honorable, reputable prince. Addison makes the point that Jasmine does not desire the freedom to become Sultana or to remain single, but rather, the freedom to marry whomever she chooses. Though Jasmine indeed never voices an ambition to someday assume her father's throne, Addison neglects to note a significant statement uttered by Jasmine in the beginning of the film. While arguing with her father about her future, she states, "I hate being forced into this. If I do marry, I want it to be for love" (p.12). The fact that Jasmine begins the statement with "if" rather than "when" suggests that, at least for part of the film, she acknowledges the option of remaining unmarried.

At the conclusion of the film, states Addison, Jasmine is indeed allowed to marry Aladdin; in doing so, she gains freedom in the form of *romantic love*. She does not learn more about her true self. She does not grow intellectually. She is merely granted the ability to marry in typical American fashion – to marry the man she loves. As Addison concludes, "For Jasmine, 'freedom' is romance" (p. 19).

Scholars also note that while many Disney heroines begin their journey with one goal in mind, that goal sometimes transforms into a different goal as the film progresses. Scholars such as Leadbeater and Wilson (1993), O'Brien (1996) and Trites (1991) use *The Little Mermaid* as a basis for this argument. In the beginning of the film, they say,

Ariel desires to escape her world as a mermaid and become part of the human world because she is fascinated with life ashore. She disobeys her father by constantly swimming to the surface and is an anomaly to other merfolk. As O'Brien states, she longs to grow intellectually, to expand her horizons and face new experiences (1996). However, when she saves Prince Eric from drowning, her goals begin to shift. She falls in love with him and eventually pursues marriage as a goal (Trites, 1991). Strengthening this argument, O'Brien attributes this behavioral pattern to that of young women in the 1980s. She states that during this wave of postfeminist thinking, these women began to stray from the feminist ideologies that challenged traditional gender roles in the 1970s and embraced more traditional views, while retaining goals such as economic equality. Ariel's apparent transition from challenging tradition to embracing tradition, says O'Brien, reflects the increasing confusion about women's roles during this time period (1996).

A heroine's motivations for achieving her goal are often just as significant as the goal itself. According to Lauren Dundes (2001), this is precisely the case in *Pocahontas*. Like Ariel, Pocahontas begins the film longing to take a stand against the system by which she feels imprisoned. Society expects her to remain a leader to her tribe; her father expects her to marry a "handsome, sturdy warrior" whom he feels can protect and provide for her. However, she wants to choose her own path based on her own dreams, rather than others' expectations of her. Nonetheless, Dundes says, once she meets John Smith, she transforms from a rebellious, free spirit to a woman in love whose actions are motivated by her feelings for him. She still follows a different path by performing actions that go against the traditions of her tribe. For example, when John Smith is about

to be executed, she leaps in front of him and saves him from her father's tomahawk. However, Dundes states that she performs these actions merely out of love for John, not to bring peace between her tribe and the English settlers or to explore her potential as a leader. To illustrate this, Dundes cites Pocahontas' declaration, "I love him!" (p. 356) which she asserts just after she saves his life.

Similarly, Gillian Youngs (1999) notes that Mulan poses as a Chinese soldier to spare her injured father from fighting in a war – an act never before undertaken by any previous Disney heroine. However, Youngs states that though Mulan does break traditional gender boundaries, "the ghost of Snow White looms large" (p. 312). Mulan does not enter the army to discover her own capabilities and self-worth; she does it to uphold her family honor and to prove that she can make her family, especially her father, proud. Like Snow White, her goal is framed by the patriarchal society in which she lives (Youngs, 1999). The fact that she achieves success appearing, speaking and acting as a male only strengthens this argument. In the end, Youngs says, Mulan returns to her domestic setting, her efforts at war materializing in the form of a potential new love.

Yet, not every heroine's journey ends with a romantic relationship, scholars say. Jill Henke et al. (1996) notes that Pocahontas' happiness "is not determined by whom she marries, but by her own discovery of selfhood" (p. 242). She says that Pocahontas seems to reject the notion of marriage altogether, whether to John Smith or to Kocoum, the tribe's strongest and bravest warrior. Her self-acceptance and leadership role within her tribe are what make her happy and fulfilled.

Henke's admiration for Pocahontas' "groundbreaking" (p. 234) decision to remain unmarried is in sharp contrast to Lauren Dundes' (2001) disapproval of that same

decision. As previously stated, Dundes asserts that throughout the film, Pocahontas acts out of love for John Smith. Her feelings for him guide virtually every decision she has made since the day they first met. However, at the end of the film, when Pocahontas is forced to choose between staying with her tribe and going to England with John, she chooses the former. She sacrifices her own desires, Dundes states, to do what is expected of her. She does what she feels is best for the tribe, not necessarily what is best for *her*. As a result, says Dundes, she gives up her chances at happiness and fulfillment. Dundes offers suggestions as to how the Walt Disney Company could have improved the film's ending:

Disney missed an opportunity to suggest that she would be a future peacekeeper. Instead of saying merely that she was needed at home, she could have said, "I'm needed here and I can't miss the opportunity to share my beliefs about how we can live in peace together"...Another acceptable ending would have been to see Pocahontas sail off into the sunset with John Smith not just because she loved him, but also because of a burning desire to explore new worlds or to serve as a type of ambassador representing her people. (p. 361)

What Dundes fails to address, however, is the possibility that other factors could have influenced Pocahontas' avoidance of a romantic relationship. Celeste Lacroix (2004) notes that her self-sacrifice genuinely represents America's Indian heroine. Her Native American ethnicity and culture, she says, are directly related to her actions throughout the film. Another point that Lacroix makes, which will be explained in more detail later in this chapter, is that Pocahontas is constructed in such a way as to emphasize

her exotic and sexual features. Her shoulders are bare and much of her thigh can be seen through the slit in her skirt (Lacroix, 2004). Lacroix suggests that perhaps this heroine's increased sexuality and exoticization pose a dilemma for the Walt Disney Company, who may find it difficult to justify her "convenient, easy transition into male-dominated institutions" (p. 226).

Overall, scholars seem to agree that the ultimate goals of Disney animated heroines are male-focused, though there is some debate regarding the nature of these domestic goals. Some scholars claim that domesticity is infused into the personalities of all heroines, while others note that newer heroines often adopt domestic goals after their initial goals have shifted. Scholars also emphasize the fact that the large majority of Disney heroines end up marrying their significant others at the conclusion of the film, regardless of whether that marriage is obvious or implied. Pocahontas is the only heroine included in this study who does not follow this pattern. As a result, some perceive her as a breakthrough Disney heroine, while others frown upon her decision because they believe she has neglected to do what she feels would bring her personal fulfillment and happiness. In addition, they note that these heroines' motivations for achieving their goals – often as important as the goal itself – are just as consistently male-dominated.

### **Personality Traits**

Besides their goals and motivations, scholars also note changes in Disney animated heroines' *personalities* through the years. Some, including Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (2004), state that older heroines lived their lives in an extremely passive and unchallenging manner. They did domestic chores, obeyed authority and never questioned what was expected of them. Snow White remained in her castle with her stepmother, the

Queen, acting as a servant while she waited for a prince to marry. Cinderella obediently cooked and cleaned for her stepmother and stepsisters, despite their constant verbal abuse. Briar Rose cleaned and picked berries in her cottage in the woods; when she discovered she was actually Princess Aurora, she eventually married the prince to whom she was betrothed (Do Rozario, 2004). Henke et al. (1996) uses Julia Wood's (1992) standpoint theory to help explain this pattern. Standpoint theory, she states, explains how a woman's position within her culture shapes and defines her experiences. As Wood notes, "Survival for those with subordinate status often depends quite literally on being able to read others, respond in ways that please others and assume responsibility for others' comfort" (p.16).

Henke goes on to say that older heroines are not only passive in nature, but also helpless, dependent and in need of protection. Indeed, Colette Dowling's book *The Cinderella Complex* (1981) communicates the view that women fear freedom and independence; they need someone to lean on, to rescue them and alleviate the anxiety of their own ambitions. She states, "We've been...taught from the time we were very young to do only those things which allow us to feel comfortable and secure. In fact we were not trained for freedom at all, but for its categorical opposite – dependency" (p. 15). Supplementing Dowling's views, Henke believes that of the three older heroines, Cinderella best illustrates Disney's stifling of its heroines' voices and sense of self. She does not stand up for herself against her stepfamily's abusive treatment of her and does not resist her isolation from society. She allows them to have complete control over what she does and where she goes. Similarly, Henke says, Aurora concludes her journey as the bride of a prince to whom her parents betrothed her; she has no input or voice regarding



the matter. Ultimately, Cinderella and Aurora, Henke asserts, are powerless to shape their own destinies and must rely on external forces to determine their fates (1996).

Many scholars claim the opposite about Disney's newer heroines. Do Rozario (2004) states that these heroines neglect societal expectations of them and long for the freedom to make their own choices. They challenge and often disobey authority and genuinely want to grow intellectually. Janet Maslin (1989) says that *The Little Mermaid* "affirms both the daughter's need for independence and the importance of the father's being able to relinquish his parental control" (p. 17). Leadbeater and Wilson (1993) compare Ariel to the "New Women" of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. These women were intelligent, independent and comfortable with their sexuality. They inspired a slew of campaigns designed to stem social disruption and challenge social norms (1993). Do Rozario (2004) makes a comparison of another kind, likening Ariel to the character of Baby from the film *Dirty Dancing*. She states that both have close relationships with their fathers, but disobey them to enter forbidden territory; this is where they both find their "Prince Charmings." Their fathers initially disapprove of their daughters' lovers, despite the attempts of Baby and Ariel to justify the choices they have made. Nonetheless, neither Baby nor Ariel breaks her romantic commitment (2004).

Sharon Downey (1996) builds upon these observations using *Beauty and the Beast*'s Belle – a character whom Maria Warner declared, "mistress of her own fate" (1992, p. 11). In her article "Feminine Empowerment in Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*," Downey notes that Belle's intelligence, independence and love of reading make her a social outcast. Those around her perceive her as a threat and therefore attempt to silence her by throwing obstacles in her path. Downey points out that Gaston, the arrogant, self-

absorbed village heartthrob, throws his muddy shoes on Belle's table, ruining her book. Similarly, the Beast takes her prisoner in lieu of her father, telling her that she can never see him again. By destroying her book and keeping her from her father, Downey states, they are symbolically taking away what she loves most, thereby attempting to ruin her rebellious spirit. However, she regains her books and her father throughout the course of the film, thus restoring her voice and sense of self. Furthermore, Downey continues, the fact that the *Beast* needs *Belle* to reverse the powerful spell that plagues him gives Belle a sense of empowerment; the inherent qualities that once made her an outcast are, ironically, the foundations for this empowerment.

Many scholars, however, claim that while these newer heroines begin the film challenging social norms and demonstrating their adventurous spirit, their actions over time suggest the loss of that spirit. As previously mentioned, Regina Bendix (1993) states that as a mermaid, Ariel was a rambunctious, free spirit; yet, as a human in love, she suddenly becomes coy and naïve, following Eric around, waiting for him to kiss her. Though Bendix makes a notable point, her argument would have been strengthened had she addressed the way merfolk typically court one another in the film. This would have better demonstrated how dramatically Ariel's personality changes as she transforms from a mermaid to a human. Similarly, Roberta Trites (1991) claims that though Ariel seems intelligent and courageous, she is incapable of being independent. She never pursues a life that does not include male protection; she aims to leave behind her father's world to embrace Eric's. Trites strengthens her argument by noting that while the real battle of the film is between Ariel and the Sea Witch, in the end, Ariel does not destroy the Sea Witch

herself – Eric does. Trites asks, “Why can’t the maid kill the witch herself? The answer: because nice girls are not supposed to have that much power” (p. 150).

Erin Addison’s (1995) research communicates the same message as Trites’ research: though newer Disney heroines may come across one way, their actions convey something completely different. Addison believes that Jasmine comes off as feisty and willful when she refuses to be forced into marriage, implying that she is also intelligent and confident. However, her dialogue and actions suggest otherwise. Jasmine claims she is intelligent, but until Jafar reveals Aladdin’s true identity, she believes him to be “Prince Ali.” She fails to see through his disguise, even after numerous hints and the fact that he nearly blows his cover at one point. Furthermore, Addison states, Jasmine’s words are not to be taken seriously. When one of Jafar’s henchmen captures Aladdin, she orders his release; he carries out Jafar’s commands anyway, despite the fact that the princess has ordered him otherwise. In another instance, when Jafar and Aladdin argue over Jasmine, she hotly exclaims, “I am not a prize to be won!” Yet, as Addison states, Aladdin “wins” her hand in the end anyway, just as he said he would (1995).

Though many scholars note differences between older and newer heroines, there are some who believe they are more alike than they seem. Scholars such as Patrick Murphy (1995) bring to light these women’s dilemmas and how they are able to escape from them. Murphy notes that many characters, including Snow White, an older heroine, and Ariel, a newer heroine, are thrown into perilous situations throughout the course of the film. For example, when the Queen arranges to have Snow White killed, the princess flees to the woods, where she collapses in fear until the forest animals “rescue” her and lead her to the cottage of the seven dwarfs (Murphy, 1995). In addition, when the Sea

Witch eventually captures Ariel, Ariel's father comes to her rescue and trades his own freedom for hers (Murphy, 1995). As previously noted, the battle between the Sea Witch and Ariel/Eric then continues until *Eric* – not Ariel – destroys her. Both of these characters, according to Murphy, are dependent on others to save them. He states, “thrown into situations in which (Disney heroines) participate in, but do not engineer, their own rescues, they conclude their adventures with only their circumstances altered; their characters remain fundamentally unchanged” (p. 134).

Pamela Colby O'Brien (1996) makes similar observations comparing Ariel with Cinderella. She says that both exude charm, grace and beauty, which make them more appealing to the opposite sex than females without these qualities; the prince chooses to dance with Cinderella over every other maiden at the ball, and the Sea King seems to favor Ariel over his other daughters. In addition, she states, both are rescued thanks to the heroism of the films' male characters; the prince sends his Grand Duke to try to find Cinderella using the glass slipper, and Eric destroys the Sea Witch at the film's conclusion. In summary, she states, “In spite of the progress women have made in society, the Walt Disney Company continues to create characters that perpetuate patriarchal values” (p. 180).

Lastly, Jacqueline Layng (2001) compares Snow White with Princess Jasmine. Both, she says, are beautiful princesses who are still children in a woman's body. Snow White is innocent, naïve and obedient (Layng, 2001). Jasmine disapproves the system under which she lives, but rather than fighting to change it, Layng says, her first instinct is to run away and helplessly rely on others to protect her. Furthermore, both may have royal status, but they hold no power over anyone outside the domestic setting. Snow

White is at the mercy of her stepmother, who is the true bearer of power. Jasmine cannot obtain what she wants unless her father acts on her wishes. Her orders are ignored and her attempts to free herself from the confines of the castle fail.

Overall, scholars believe that Disney's older animated heroines were mostly passive and obedient. They did as authority commanded and lived their lives without questioning the system that dominated them, merely waiting for their true loves to come to their rescue. While many believe the opposite about newer heroines, some say that these Disney women have barely evolved at all, as the rebellious attitudes and spirited words of newer heroines cover up a more traditional, more patriarchal view of life. Still others take this to another level by saying that there are fewer differences between older and newer heroines than what meets the eye.

### **Worth Relative to Plot**

Scholars have different views regarding how each Disney animated heroine drives the progression of her film, as well as her importance to the overall plot. In her analysis of *Snow White*, Brenda Ayres (1999) believes the following to be the film's message: the source of a woman's worth is her beauty, which she must use to attract a man. This beauty is not intended to be used for any sort of self-liberating power; it must only be used to unite with a man. To support her argument, she states that the Queen is killed at the film's conclusion because, though she possesses the power to disguise herself into an old woman, she is not the most beautiful female character and therefore lacks real worth. Contrarily, she states, Snow White is the "fairest in the land;" therefore, she attracts the prince, gains his love and lives happily ever after.

Nicole Arthur (1995) supports Ayres' beliefs by pointing out that Snow White and Aurora are ultimately paired with their true loves while asleep. They do not reach the peaks of their romantic journeys while conversing or spending quality time with their significant others. It is their beauty, not their actions, that drives the plot and resolves the conflicts of the film (1995).

Lauren and Alan Dundes (2000) notice a similar theme with the first of Disney's newer heroines. They take note of the fact that Ariel is allowed to become a human only when she gives up her voice. They say that her inability to speak means that she is "dumb," confirming the male chauvinist ideology that the ideal woman is beautiful, yet dumb; in this instance, "dumb" does not necessarily mean "unintelligent," but "mute" (2000). Supporting this research, Kathi Maio (1998) states that Ariel is literally silenced by her longing for male acceptance. She interprets the film's message as, "Shut up and be beautiful" (p. 13).

The pattern that physical beauty drives a plot forward is disrupted with Pocahontas and Belle, according to such scholars as Jill Henke et al. (1996) and Sharon Downey (1996). Henke states that throughout *Pocahontas*, the title character is an active doer (1996). She acts on political stances, such as alternatives to violence, that impact not just Pocahontas, but her fellow Indians and English settlers as well (1996). Downey states that Belle not only rejects the constant advances of Gaston, the village heartthrob, but more importantly, holds the fate of the Beast and all of his servants in her hands (1996). According to Downey, it is *the Beast* who needs *Belle*, not the other way around, since she is the only person who can break the powerful spell placed on the castle. It is therefore Belle's actions, not her beauty, that make the film progress. She

drives the plot's tension and resolves conflict because of what she does throughout the film, as opposed to what she looks like. This further empowers the character by making her the focus of the Beast's unfolding story (Downey, 1996).

Susan Jeffords (1995) believes that *Beauty and the Beast* portrays Belle as superior to the townspeople because of her love of reading and her unwillingness to follow society's provincial example. However, once she and the Beast cross paths, Jeffords perceives Belle as less of a narrative focus and more of a tool to help solve the Beast's problem. Throughout the film, says Jeffords, Belle is there to teach him how to be polite, how to eat with a spoon, how to read, how to dance, and ultimately, how to love (1995). Unlike Downey, who emphasizes female empowerment, Jeffords perceives Belle as merely a mechanism in the Beast's journey to break his curse. Kathi Maio (1998) identifies another patriarchal implication of the film: women are responsible for taming men. If a woman is beautiful and sweet enough, she can transform a violent, untamed beast into a charming prince. Her views echo those of Jeffords; both perceive Belle as an object used to tame the Beast and break the spell on the castle, rather than an agent on whom the story is focused.

In her discussion of *Aladdin*, Kathi Maio (1998) describes Jasmine as nothing more than a pawn traded back and forth between Aladdin and Jafar, the evil Royal Vizier. Erin Addison (1995) elaborates on Maio's views, noting that the very first line about Jasmine in the film is, "Good luck marrying *her* off" (p. 12). Because this is the first the viewer hears about Jasmine, it immediately introduces her as an object of social exchange (Maio, 1998).

In stark contrast to Maio and Addison's descriptions of Jasmine, Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (2004) comments on Mulan's much more significant worth in relation to her film's plot. She notes that Mulan has a mother and father, but no brother, which is why her father must enlist in the Imperial Army upon the arrival of the Huns. When Mulan enters the army in her father's place, Do Rozario states, she takes on the role of soldier and son. When she succeeds in the battle, her father says to her, "The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter" (p. 52). Do Rozario believes that in saying this, Mulan's father is celebrating his daughter. He does not wish for a son or comment on the absence of a son. Mulan, therefore, represents the disruption of patriarchy by a daughter in Disney animated films (Do Rozario, 2004).

In general, most scholars believe that older heroines drive their film's plot forward because of their physical beauty. Their beauty is what makes them attractive and valuable to their male counterparts, and it is what gives them their worth in the film. Some state that this is carried over to Disney's newer heroines, while others believe that Disney's heroines have evolved and now represent a change in the pattern. They perceive them as empowered, action-oriented heroines who are highly significant to the films' other characters and overall plot.

### **Physical Appearance**

The physical appearance (i.e. clothing, body size, shape, etc.) of Disney's heroines is another significant factor to consider when discussing how these heroines are portrayed. Scholars such as Elizabeth Bell (1995) categorize older heroines as graceful and elegant. She believes that with her expressive eyes, pouting lips and broadly drawn features, Snow White resembles the ingénue of the silent film era. Cinderella is



reminiscent of Grace Kelly in the cultured and stately way in which she carries herself, even in her work clothes. Aurora, who, according to Bell, has been described as Disney's most beautiful heroine, has the look and shape of a Barbie doll, with her tiny waist and long, blond hair (1995). What all three heroines have in common, Bell states, is that they were constructed through the lens of classical ballet. They were actually modeled after the bodies of professional dancers (Bell, 1995). For this reason, Bell believes they are portrayed as graceful, stately and dainty. They even move as ballerinas, with a straight posture and rotating hips (Bell, 1995). Do Rozario (2004) notes instances in which the heroines, especially Cinderella and Aurora, actually do dance with their princes. She claims that they dance in regal ballet styles, spinning and twirling gracefully across the dance floor. Furthermore, Nicole Arthur (1995) notes that Snow White is so dainty and ladylike that she rides sidesaddle atop the prince's horse along the way to his castle.

Though many overwhelmingly emphasize the daintiness of these heroines, Bell (1995) warns viewers not to mistaken them for weak characters. She says that because they were each given the body of a dancer, each of them has a backbone. Their bodies communicate strength, discipline and control. Thus, while scholars like Arthur make such observations as, "Snow White couldn't even run through the woods without tripping – how could she do otherwise in those dainty, bowed pumps?" (1995, par. 8), Bell maintains that weak, helpless portrayals of these animated heroines are totally unrelated to their body structure. As Bell puts it, "The bodies of Disney teenagers make a...self-reflexive claim: 'I'm not weak, I just talk that way.'" (1995, p. 115).

Scholars such as Arthur (1995) focus also on the heroines' specific type of appeal. Arthur considers Snow White not a cover girl, but a pretty pubescent girl, with chubby

cheeks and a flat chest. Similarly, John Grant (1998) states that because Walt Disney opted for “girl-next-door prettiness rather than out-and-out beauty” (p. 159), the princess is extremely attractive in a child-like way, from her short, dark hair to her delicate heels. Grant even states that she still possesses, to a degree, a bit of childhood plumpness (1998).

In stark contrast to the stately, dainty, sometimes childlike heroines of the Walt Disney era are the newer heroines, who most scholars deem exotic, sexual and sporty. Bell (1995) points out that while older heroines were modeled after dancers, Ariel and Belle were modeled after Sherri Stoner, a member of a Los Angeles improvisational group called the Groundlings (p. 113). Earlier models were chosen for their dainty stature and graceful movements; Stoner was chosen for her small frame and expressive face (Bell, 1995). Other differences, says Bell, lie in the burlesque-type way in which newer heroines, specifically Ariel, are portrayed. She notes that their bare midriffs and cleavage-revealing tops entice society with the warning, “Look, but don’t touch” (1995, p. 114).

Celeste Lacroix’s (2004) opinions differ slightly from Bell’s. She notes that Ariel and Belle, though more athletic than previous heroines, share more in common with Disney’s older heroines than some may believe. According to Lacroix, they retain the same porcelain skin tone and dainty physical features. Indeed, both Ariel and Belle dance with their respective partners and move with the same ballerina-style fluidity and grace as Cinderella and Aurora (Lacroix, 2004). Regarding clothing, Belle wears full-length dresses that offer a more traditional view of the Disney animated heroine. Ariel wears similar attire as a human, though Lacroix admits that as a mermaid, Ariel wears

nothing more than a seashell bra to cover her upper body. Nonetheless, Lacroix believes that over time, Disney heroines have become increasingly exotic and sexual in terms of how they look, act and dress (2004).

Lacroix views Jasmine as a transition between older and newer heroines. She, too, possesses a petite, dainty frame, as well as a small nose and mouth (2004). However, she introduces a new physical feature: large, almond-shaped eyes that she calls “exotic” (p. 218). Her outfit includes an off-the-shoulder, midriff-baring blouse that accentuates her chest and tiny waist (Lacroix, 2004). Erin Addison (1995) describes her as “an Arab Barbie doll in a belly-dancer costume” (p. 12). In addition, as Do Rozario (2004) states, she is sportier than previous heroines; in one instance during the film, she pole-vaults across the roofs of two tall buildings.

Lacroix (2004) believes that Pocahontas marked the beginning of a completely different physical representation of the Disney heroine. Though she has the same almond-shaped eyes as Jasmine, it is Pocahontas’ body that is her most notable feature, according to Lacroix. She is tall and slender, with long legs, thick, “untamed” hair and a developed bust, making her much more physically exotic and sexual than previous heroines. In addition, says Lacroix, her attire is designed to emphasize certain physical features, such as her bare shoulders and long legs (which, as previously mentioned, can be clearly seen through the slit in her skirt). Indeed, Ziauddin Sardar (1996-1997) cites an interview in which Mel Gibson, the voice of John Smith in the film, says of Disney’s Pocahontas, “I mean, she’s a babe, isn’t she, you’ve got to say it” (p. 18). Do Rozario (2004) adds that Pocahontas also constantly demonstrates her athleticism throughout the film, running, jumping, even diving off waterfalls and river-rafting along dangerous

currents, suggesting a shift in Disney animated heroines from ballet princesses to heroes of sport.

In general, scholars emphasize a significant difference between the physical depiction of Disney's older heroines and that of newer heroines. Older heroines are depicted as graceful and elegant, much like ballerinas. They are dainty and light on their feet and are, in some respects, even childlike. Many believe that newer heroines are portrayed in a more sexual light, with small waists and developed busts, as well as clothing that accentuates these features; others see a more traditional, conservative look in some of Disney's newer heroines. Nonetheless, many state that they are sportier than older heroines, as they are adept at such athletic activities as running, jumping and diving.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, there appear to be conflicting scholarly viewpoints along the four parameters of this study. While scholars agree that the ultimate goals of Disney animated heroines focus largely on men, many debate whether these heroines are naturally prone to the pursuit of domestic goals or have evolved so that they now develop them only after their initial goals have changed. Pocahontas is the only heroine included in this study who remains single at the end of her film; some therefore perceive her as a breakthrough Disney heroine, while others believe her rejection of a romantic partnership has deprived her of personal fulfillment and happiness.

Regarding their character traits, scholars believe that Disney's older animated heroines were mostly passive and obedient. While many believe the opposite about newer heroines, some note a lack of significant evolution among these women, stating

that newer heroines' rebellious attitudes and spirited words cover up more traditional, more domesticated personalities.

In general, most scholars believe that the significance of older heroines lies in their physical beauty. Some state that this is carried over to Disney's newer heroines, while others believe these newer, more evolved heroines to be empowered and action-oriented, representing a change in the pattern.

The physical depiction of Disney heroines is one subject on which scholars tend to agree. They state that older heroines are seen as graceful, elegant and dainty. Contrarily, they believe that most newer heroines are portrayed in a more sexual light, with small waists and accentuated cleavage. They also note their sportier, more athletic personas.

Because scholars tend to debate these subjects, a content analysis of these films is appropriate to determine which perspectives seem more correct than others.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

The objective of this research study is to determine how the portrayal of Disney animated heroines has evolved from its first heroine, Snow White, to its last heroine to date, Mulan. As previously stated, the study will be based on the following Walt Disney animated films: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*. These films meet all of the qualifications specified under “Limitations” in Chapter I. In addition, they are included on the Walt Disney Company’s list of its top 25 best selling DVDs/videos (2004) and/or they have a human female as the title character. These two criteria are crucial; films that meet these criteria typically are the subjects of a great deal of pre-existing research.

A **content analysis** will be performed on these eight films. After the films are viewed and analyzed, their heroines will be grouped based on the following:

- Demographics
- Goals/Motivations
- Romance
- Personality Traits
  - Acceptance/Rejection of Societal Norms
  - Dependence/Independence
  - Dominance/Submission
- Worth Relative to Plot
- Physical Appearance

The categories that comprise each of the above are derived from three different sources. One significant source is a dissertation by Beth A. Wiersma entitled “The Gendered World of Disney: A Content Analysis of Gender Themes in Full-Length Animated Disney Feature Films” (2000). In her dissertation, Wiersma analyzes male and female leading and secondary characters in 16 Disney animated films. Her categories are developed from Linda Jean Busby’s 1974 study of traditional sex roles demonstrated in children’s cartoon programming. Another source is Keisha L. Hoerrner’s “Gender Roles in Disney Films: Analyzing Behaviors from Snow White to Simba” (1996), in which Hoerrner numerically codes the behaviors of male and female leading and secondary characters in 11 Disney animated films.

After compiling categories from these two sources, I concluded that while they provided a strong foundation for my research, I wanted a more complete picture of each heroine, framed by categories that are more reflective of what was discovered in the literature review. This would allow me to more accurately track the heroines’ progression from the first heroine to the last and pinpoint the exact source of any differences that exist between them. I therefore tightened the definitions of Wiersma and Hoerrner’s categories, while simultaneously adding my own categories and definitions to the study.

### **Demographics**

**Age** – How old the heroine appears to be

**Race/Nationality** – Based on skin color, eye shape and geographic location in which the story takes place

**Occupation/Title** – What the heroine does for a living and/or the title (i.e. princess) she bears

**Older/Newer Heroine** – The heroine is classified as older if she was created during Walt Disney's life. The heroine is classified as newer if she was created after Walt Disney's death in 1966.

### **Goals/Motivations**

**Nature of the First Goal that the Heroine Voices** (either through a song or through spoken word.)

**Male-Centered** – The heroine voices a longing to pursue a romantic relationship with a man.

**Other-Centered** – The heroine voices a longing to pursue acceptance, approval or respect from family, friends and/or society.

**Self-Centered** – The heroine voices a longing to pursue freedom from a life or system by which she feels trapped.

**Other** – The heroine's goal is completely different from the previous three.

### **Motivation for Achieving Goal**

**Romance** – The heroine is attracted to, has feelings for and/or is in love with a specific man.

**Responsibility** – The heroine feels it is her duty to act in a certain manner for the sake of others.

**Self-Motivation** – The heroine genuinely wants to grow intellectually, to have new experiences and expand her horizons.



**Other** – The heroine’s motivations are completely different from the previous three, or are unknown.

**Specific Goal of Heroine that is at Stake During the Film’s Climax** (This may or may not be different from the heroine’s initial goal.)

**Romantic Relationship** – The heroine’s current or potential romance with a man is in jeopardy, perhaps because the life of one or both characters is in danger, or perhaps because of external forces keeping them apart.

**Acceptance/Approval/Respect from Others** – The heroine’s ability to pursue acceptance, approval or respect from family, friends and/or society is in jeopardy, perhaps because the heroine’s life is in danger, or perhaps because of external forces keeping her from her goal.

**Freedom** – The heroine’s ability to gain freedom from a life or system by which she feels trapped is in jeopardy, perhaps because the heroine’s life is in danger, or perhaps because of the strength of the system that entraps her.

**Does Heroine Achieve Goal that is at Stake During the Film’s Climax?**

**Apparent Sentiment of Heroine After She Does/Does Not Achieve This Goal**

**Satisfied** – The heroine is grinning, dancing, singing and/or crying happily.

**Unsatisfied** – The heroine is not grinning, dancing, singing or crying happily, or her facial expression is unclear.

### **Romance**

**Married** – The heroine gets married at the conclusion of the film.

**In a Relationship** – The heroine concludes the film in a romantic relationship, but is not married.

**Single** – The heroine concludes the film with no significant other.

**Acceptance/Rejection of Societal Norms**

**Passive (Accepts)** – The heroine complies with what society/authority wants her to do and how society/authority wants her to act. (For these purposes, “authority” represents the person or group of people who create the norms that the heroine is expected to follow.) She accepts these norms without objection; even if she is disappointed with these norms, she does not voice a desire to change them and continues to do exactly as she is told.

**Aggressive (Rejects)** – The heroine is bossy or controlling. She may also engage in verbal and/or physical confrontation. She is unhappy with what society/authority wants her to do and how society/authority wants her to act; she intends to do what she wants, despite societal norms.

**Other Characters’ Language** – Language/phrases/terms used by other characters to describe the heroine (i.e. “stubborn,” “headstrong,” “obedient,” etc.)

**Total Time Spent Performing Housekeeping Duties** – This encompasses all instances in which the heroine is **shown** beautifying or up keeping a home and/or serving its inhabitants (i.e. sweeping, dusting, serving food, etc.).

**Total Time Spent Acting Against Societal Norms** – This encompasses all instances in which the heroine is **shown** acting against what society/authority wants her to do and/or how society/authority wants her to act (i.e. fighting, trespassing forbidden areas, dressing as a member of the opposite sex, etc.).

### **Dependence/Independence**

**Dependent** – The heroine must be rescued by others at some point throughout the duration of the film to save her from impending danger or doom, especially during the film’s climax or conclusion.

**Independent** – The heroine does not need to be rescued by others at all.

### **Dominance/Submission**

**Dominant** – The heroine does not bow to authority (the person or group of people who create the norms that the heroine is expected to follow) in the film, and/or other human characters in the film exclusively depend on the heroine for their happiness or survival (they **cannot** survive or be happy without the heroine).

**Submissive** – The heroine must bow to authority. Furthermore, other human characters within the film can be happy and can survive without the heroine.

### **Worth Relative to Plot**

**Object** – The heroine is considered an object within the plot if she takes no willful action to create new tension or to increase already-existing tension between “good” and “evil”, OR if the heroine’s *physical beauty* creates or increases that tension. In addition, the heroine takes no willful action to bring the film to its “happy” ending, OR the heroine’s *physical beauty* brings the film to its “happy” ending.

**First Object, Then Agent** – The heroine takes no willful action to create new tension or to increase already-existing tension between “good” and “evil”, OR the heroine’s *physical beauty* creates or increases that tension. However, the heroine does take willful action to bring the film to its “happy” ending.

**First Agent, Then Object** – The heroine takes willful action to create new tension or to increase already-existing tension between “good” and “evil.” However, the heroine takes no willful action to bring the film to its “happy” ending, OR the heroine’s *physical beauty* brings the film to its “happy” ending.

**Agent** – The heroine is considered an agent within the plot if she takes willful action to create new tension or to increase already-existing tension between “good” and “evil.” In addition, the heroine takes willful action to bring the film to its “happy” ending.

### **Physical Appearance**

#### **Clothing**

**Traditional** – The heroine wears a dress or skirt for most of the film.

**Modern** – The heroine wears pants or other attire for most of the film.

#### **Level of Attractiveness**

**Pretty** – The heroine wears clothing that covers her cleavage, midriff and most of her legs throughout most of the film. Her hair may be pulled back from her face with a headband, hair tie or barrettes throughout most of the film.

**Beautiful/Sexy** – The heroine wears clothing that reveals her cleavage, midriff and/or most of her legs throughout most of the film. Her hair may be let loose throughout most of the film.

**Terms Other Characters Use When Referring to the Heroine** (i.e. “beautiful,” “gorgeous,” “lovely,” etc.)

#### **Body Movements**

**Dainty** – The heroine moves cautiously and light on her feet. She walks throughout most of the film and usually refrains from more athletic movements such as running, jumping and swimming. If she does move in such a manner, she does so gracefully (i.e. her arms and fingers are extended, she looks as though she tiptoes).

**Sporty** – The heroine runs, jumps, swims and moves in other athletic ways freely and without hesitation. She resembles an athlete when she moves (i.e. her hands are balled up into fists, she runs and jumps with a look of determination on her face).

## **Chapter IV: Research Results**

This research study analyzes the portrayal of Disney animated heroines from 1937 – 1998. Specifically, it investigates changes in their goals and motivations, personality traits, physical appearances and worth relative to the plot of their films. By observing how these characters have evolved, one can draw correlations about why they are portrayed in such a manner, as well as what messages their portrayals communicate to audiences all over the country.

Each of the eight aforementioned Disney films were formally screened at least twice – and paused and rewound when necessary – to correctly group their heroines into the previously described categories. Special attention was given to the films' dialogue; each film was viewed with the closed captioning on, so as to capture the exact words spoken and sung by each heroine and her supporting characters. The heroines' actions, attire, facial features and movements were also studied.

### **Significant Findings**

According to the results of the content analysis, Disney's animated heroines have evolved in the following significant ways:

- From playing no functional role within their plots, to actively driving their stories forward. This is the most significant result, as it paves the way for the remaining findings.
- From accepting societal norms, to rejecting societal norms.
- From submitting to authority, to refusing to submit to authority.
- From depending on others to rescue them from danger, to being largely self-reliant.

- From being depicted as graceful, dainty and largely Caucasian, to more athletic, sexually appealing and more culturally diverse.
- In general, all heroines pine for a romantic partnership. However, the analysis indicates that they have evolved from women in search of nothing more than a romantic relationship, to women who first long for personal growth and fulfillment, but eventually pursue romantic love.

The following describes these findings in greater detail.

### **Demographics**

<b>Heroine</b>	<b>Older/Newer</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/Nationality</b>	<b>Occupation/Title</b>
Snow White	Older	16	Caucasian	Princess
Cinderella	Older	21	Caucasian	Homemaker
Aurora	Older	16*	Caucasian	Princess
Ariel	Newer	16*	Caucasian	Princess
Belle	Newer	21	Caucasian	Inventor's Daughter
Jasmine	Newer	20	<b>Middle Eastern</b>	Princess
Pocahontas	Newer	25	<b>Native American</b>	Princess
Mulan	Newer	16	<b>Chinese</b>	Ex-Soldier's Daughter

*\*Exact age given in the film. All others are estimated.*

The above results indicate an overall stability among the ages and occupations of Disney heroines. These women all seem relatively young, ranging in age from approximately 16 – 25. In addition, most of Disney's heroines throughout the years have been princesses. The few who are not princesses have titles or professions that are based on others, lacking any indication of their own worth. For example, when we are first introduced to Belle during the song of the same name in *Beauty and the Beast*, Gaston points to her and declares, "I've got my sights set on that one," to which his friend Lefou replies, "The inventor's daughter?" (Ashman et al. & Trousdale et al., 1991).

One notable trend emerging in recent years involves the heroines' races/nationalities. Disney's first five heroines are Caucasian, while Jasmine is Middle

Eastern, Pocahontas is Native American and Mulan is Chinese. This is evident by their skin color and/or geographic location (Jasmine lives in the fictional Arabian land of Agrabah, Pocahontas lives in pre-colonial Virginia and Mulan lives in China). A somewhat puzzling note about this trend is that it did **not** begin with the introduction of Disney's newer heroines. Rather, it began with Jasmine, just one year after Caucasian Belle graced the silver screen, prompting viewers to wonder why the company so suddenly decided to infuse racial diversity into its heroines.

### Worth Relative to Plot

Heroine	Older/ Newer	Object	First Object, then Agent	First Agent, then Object	Agent
Snow White	Older	✓			
Cinderella	Older	✓			
Aurora	Older	✓			
Ariel	Newer			✓	
Belle	Newer				✓
Jasmine	Newer	✓			
Pocahontas	Newer				✓
Mulan	Newer				✓

An important factor to consider when analyzing the heroines of Disney animated films is their worth relative to the plot of their films. How significant is the heroine's role in the story? What is it exactly that drives the plot forward – the character's actions or her beauty? According to the above results, older heroines tend to be objects in their films, while most newer heroines take on a more active role in plot progression. This noteworthy finding may help to explain the remaining results of the analysis.

Older heroines Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora, as well as newer heroine Jasmine, are all considered objects within their films. That is, they take no willful action to create new tension or to increase already-existing tension between “good” and “evil,”



nor do they take willful action to bring the film to its “happy” ending. The queen’s hatred for Snow White stems from her jealousy of Snow White’s physical beauty, not from anything Snow White has done or said. At the film’s end, Prince Charming kisses the sleeping princess and thus awakens her from the queen’s evil spell. She plays no active role in any of this. Similarly, Cinderella’s stepmother and stepsisters despise Cinderella simply because she is so fair and graceful. The only reason she is able to try on the glass slipper at the end of the film is because her animal friends have freed her from her locked room. She does not escape on her own, nor does she stand up to her stepmother and defend her right to try on the slipper when they first learn of the king’s decree. The tension between good and evil in *Sleeping Beauty* is created when the king and queen neglect to invite Maleficent to the presentation of the small princess. Later, Aurora must be kissed by the prince in order for the film to reach its happy ending. These discoveries support the research of such scholars as Nicole Arthur (1995) and Brenda Ayres (1999), who believe that older heroines illustrate that the source of a woman’s worth is her beauty, which she must use to drive the plot and resolve the conflicts of her film.

Finally, in *Aladdin*, the tension between the title character and the villainous Jafar centers on Jafar’s perception of Aladdin as a threat to the throne, which has nothing to do with Jasmine. Additionally, the film concludes happily when Aladdin defeats Jafar, and the sultan grants Jasmine the right to choose her own husband, an act in which Jasmine plays no active role.

The first heroine to break this pattern is Ariel, who begins *The Little Mermaid* as an agent before taking a far less active role at the film’s conclusion. Her strong will and

determination to become a human at the beginning of the story, despite her father's wishes, is what escalates the tension between good (the human world and the "merworld") and evil (Ursula the Sea Witch). However, when the film concludes, she merely stands aside as her prince defeats her enemy and her father permanently transforms her into a human. She does nothing to orchestrate any of this. This echoes the research of Kathi Maio (1998) and Lauren and Alan Dundes (2000), who state that throughout the film, Ariel's once spirited nature becomes silenced, interpreting the film's message as, "Shut up and be beautiful" (1998, p. 13).

In stark contrast, Belle, Pocahontas and Mulan are true agents throughout their entire films. Belle and Pocahontas create tension by rejecting the advances of their respective suitors – Gaston and Kocoum – and instead befriend their social "enemies" – the Beast and John Smith, respectively. Pocahontas leaps in front of her father in an attempt to save the man she loves, thereby preventing a war between her tribe and the English settlers. Additionally, it is Belle's active choice to love and care for the Beast, instead of shunning him as an outcast as the rest of society does, that brings her film to its happy conclusion. This result contrasts sharply with the claims of such scholars as Susan Jeffords (1995), who perceives Belle as merely a mechanism in the Beast's journey to break his curse, rather than an agent on whom the story is focused.

Lastly, Mulan's actions as a soldier enhance the pre-existing tension between the Huns and the Chinese army, and it is those same actions that defeat the Huns and earn her the honor and respect of her father. Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (2004) takes Mulan's significant role in the film to yet another level by stating that because Mulan's father celebrates his daughter's achievements and does not wish for a son or comment on the

absence of a son, Mulan represents the disruption of patriarchy by a daughter in Disney animated films. It is through these newer, more proactive heroines that the Walt Disney Company communicates the concepts of strength, determination and being the master of one's own destiny.

### Personality Traits

Heroine	Older/ Newer	Accepts /Rejects Societal Norms	Other Characters' Description of Heroine	Percent of Film Spent House- keeping	Percent of Film Spent "Rebelling"	Dependent/ Independent	Dominant/ Submissive
Snow White	Older	Accepts	"Gentle," "Little"	3.12%	None	Dependent	Submissive
Cinderella	Older	Accepts	"Gentle," "Kind," "Nice"	4.28%	None	Dependent	Submissive
Aurora	Older	Accepts	"Sweet," "Dear," "Precious"	0.31%	None	Dependent	Submissive
Ariel	Newer	<b>Rejects</b>	"Headstrong," "Lovesick," "Hopeless"	<b>None</b>	<b>27.21%</b>	Dependent	<b>Dominant</b>
Belle	Newer	<b>Rejects</b>	"Strange," "Funny," "Peculiar," "Odd," "Crazy," "Stubborn"	<b>0.32%</b>	<b>9.72%</b>	Dependent	<b>Dominant</b>
Jasmine	Newer	<b>Rejects</b>	"Picky," "Shrew"	<b>None</b>	<b>4.74%</b>	Dependent	Submissive
Pocahontas	Newer	<b>Rejects</b>	"Free spirit"	<b>None</b>	<b>13.44%</b>	<b>Independent</b>	<b>Dominant</b>
Mulan	Newer	<b>Rejects</b>	"Disgrace," "Trouble maker," "Treacherous snake"	<b>0.17%</b>	<b>6.69%</b>	<b>Independent</b>	<b>Dominant</b>

The above results demonstrate a clear difference between Disney's older heroines and newer heroines in terms of their personality traits. Older heroines tend to obediently accept societal norms and are largely dependent and submissive, while newer heroines rebel against what is expected of them and tend to be more dominant. This newer tendency to reject expectations and avoid succumbing to authority makes sense given

that, as previously stated, Disney's heroines have evolved into active go-getters within their plots.

Throughout each of their respective films, Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora never question what is expected of them. Echoing the words of Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (2004), they do exactly as they are told, regardless of whether or not they believe it is right. Snow White, a princess, works as a servant in her castle because the queen commands it. Cinderella takes orders from her stepmother and stepsisters, even though the estate that she works so hard to upkeep once belonged to her own father. Aurora lives as a peasant girl in the forest for much of her young life. When she discovers she is actually a princess and therefore has to return home to assume her throne, she weeps sorrowfully, yet does and says nothing to reject this expectation. The terms that supporting characters use to describe these heroines reflect their compliant, unquestioning nature. These terms include "gentle," "sweet," "kind" and "nice."

Beginning with Ariel, Disney's heroines have evolved in such a way that they now question societal norms and demonstrate a longing for something different. They rebel against what is expected of them in a variety of ways. Janet Maslin (1989) says that *The Little Mermaid* "affirms both the daughter's need for independence and the importance of the father's being able to relinquish his parental control" (p. 17). Indeed, Ariel – who, in one scene, defiantly shouts to her father, "I'm 16 years old! I'm not a child anymore!" (Ashman et al. & Clements et al., 1989) – tires of life as a mermaid and becomes a human despite her father's demands. Jasmine rejects the rule that she must marry before her next birthday. When her father points out that she is a princess and therefore must abide by the laws of the land, she boldly states, "Then maybe I don't want

to be a princess anymore!” (Clements et al. & Clements et.al., 1992). Even Mulan, who tries initially to live by the norms that govern her society, impersonates a male soldier to protect her father’s life – an act that, if discovered, could have led to her execution. While Disney’s older heroines were often described as “sweet” and “gentle,” newer heroines are typically regarded as “headstrong,” “peculiar,” “crazy,” “picky” and “trouble makers” by those around them.

Still another way in which to determine which heroines are obedient and which are rebellious is to compare the amount of time each spends performing household chores with the amount of time each spends acting against societal expectations. These percentages were determined by calculating how much time the women are actually **shown** on camera performing each of these tasks and dividing the result by the total length of each film. As the results demonstrate, older heroines spend an average of 2.57% of their films performing household chores, while they spend no time rebelling against societal norms. On the contrary, newer heroines spend an average of only 0.25% of their films doing chores, while much more time – 12.36% on average – is spent acting against what is expected of them.

Just as older heroines are more accepting of societal norms than newer heroines, so too are they more submissive to authority – that is, the person or group of people who creates the norms that the heroines are expected to follow. Still another factor that strips them of any dominant presence in their films is that no person or group of people depends exclusively on these heroines for their happiness or survival. However, most newer heroines are, in fact, dominant. They do not bow to authority, and they act on their rejection of societal norms. Furthermore, the characters imprisoned in the castle in

*Beauty and the Beast* depend exclusively on Belle for their happiness and survival, enhancing her dominance in the film. The beast must earn her love if he and his servants are to have any chance of transforming into the humans they once were. Without her, they are forced to live and die as objects and creatures. This supports the research of Sharon Downey (1996), who notes that Belle's intelligence, independence and love of reading make her a social outcast. Yet the fact that she possesses these qualities is precisely why the Beast needs her, giving Belle a sense of empowerment from the qualities that made her an outcast at home.

The only newer heroine who is submissive, rather than dominant, is Jasmine. The others do as they please regardless of what society may demand of them. However, Jasmine, as stated by Erin Addison (1995) and Jacqueline Layng (2001), succumbs to authority on several occasions throughout *Aladdin*. In one scene, she attempts to escape the palace walls disguised as a commoner; when she is caught by a security guard, she returns to the palace and reassumes her crown. Additionally, her status as a princess seems insignificant to those who should be inferior to her. When she commands a guard to release the captured Aladdin, he refuses, stating, "I would, Princess, but my orders come from Jafar. You'll have to take it up with him" (Clements et al. & Clements et al., 1992). Jasmine obediently complies.

A final angle of personality traits involves dependence on others. Only two of the eight heroines – Pocahontas and Mulan – are completely independent in their films, meaning that they need not be rescued from impending danger or doom throughout the course of their films. Older heroines Snow White and Aurora must be kissed by their significant others in order for them to awaken from the sleeping spell under which they

have been placed. Cinderella, locked in her room, escapes with the help of her animal friends just in time to try on her infamous glass slipper. Ariel, helplessly trapped by Ursula, can only stand aside and watch as Prince Eric destroys the mermaid's enemy for her. The Beast saves Belle's life just as she is about to be savagely attacked by a pack of wolves, despite her feeble attempts to fight them off herself. Jasmine, trapped in a life-sized hourglass, needs Aladdin to break her free if she is to survive. Colette Dowling (1981) would say that these heroines are victims of the "Cinderella Complex," as they tend to avoid freedom and independence and rely on others to protect them. In stark contrast to these heroines, Pocahontas and Mulan do not depend on supporting characters for assistance. They rescue themselves from life-threatening situations. Though scholars like Patrick Murphy (1995) and Pamela Colby O'Brien (1996) emphasize the helplessness of Disney heroines and the prolonging of patriarchal values in their films, the independence of these newest heroines with respect to their ability to save themselves from harm is something that must be noted.

Overtime, Disney's message to its viewers seems to have evolved from, "Be good, sweet and obedient and you'll get everything you want," to "Stand up for what you want, even in the face of adversity, and you'll achieve it." The company also cautions viewers that those around them may not approve of their strong will, which could rub young viewers the wrong way, since no one wants to have difficulty fitting in with society. Additionally, an emergence of independent heroines suggests that standing helplessly by and waiting for someone to come to your rescue has been replaced with fighting proactively for your own safety and well being.

**Physical Appearance**

<b>Heroine</b>	<b>Older/ Newer</b>	<b>Clothing</b>	<b>Level of Attractiveness</b>	<b>Other Characters' Description of Heroine</b>	<b>Body Movements</b>
Snow White	Older	Traditional	Pretty	"Lovely," "Grace," "Fair," "Pretty," "Angel"	Dainty
Cinderella	Older	Traditional	Pretty	"Charm," "Beauty"	Dainty
Aurora	Older	Traditional	Pretty	"Beauty," "Fair," "Grace"	Dainty
Ariel	Newer	<b>Modern</b>	<b>Beautiful/Sexy</b>	"Pretty," "a vision," "Wonderful," "Lovely"	Dainty
Belle	Newer	Traditional	Pretty	"Fair," "Beautiful," "Gorgeous," "Pretty"	Dainty
Jasmine	Newer	<b>Modern</b>	<b>Beautiful/Sexy</b>	"Pretty," "Beautiful," "desert bloom"	<b>Sporty</b>
Pocahontas	Newer	Traditional	<b>Beautiful/Sexy</b>	None	<b>Sporty</b>
Mulan	Newer	<b>Modern</b>	Pretty	"Tough-looking," "Pretty"	<b>Sporty</b>

As the above results indicate, all three older heroines are portrayed as pretty and dainty, with a traditional dress code. Though some newer heroines also follow this prototype, many take on a sexier, more modern look and move about in a sporty, rather than dainty, fashion. These heroines' increased athleticism also reflects their newer, more active roles as plot-drivers within their films.

Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora are dressed traditionally with respect to how our culture typically perceives a "traditional" dress code (i.e. dresses and skirts for women). Each dons a full-length dress complete with high-heeled shoes. In addition, their physical beauty can be considered pretty, rather than beautiful or sexy, as their clothing completely covers their cleavage, midriff and most of their legs, and their hair is pulled back from their faces. Indeed, scholars such as John Grant (1998) note that Walt Disney opted for "girl-next-door prettiness rather than out-and-out beauty" (p. 159) when he created Snow White. They are also exceedingly elegant and stately, demonstrating beauty of a classical nature, as stated by Elizabeth Bell (1995). This is also evident in the



words their supporting characters use to describe their physical beauty, which include “lovely,” “fair” and “grace.” The Magic Mirror in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* goes into great detail describing the princess’ appearance: “Hair black as ebony, lips red as the rose, skin white as snow” (Disney & Hand, 1937). Yet, none of these descriptions emphasize what one would consider “sexy” features (i.e. flowing hair, exotic eyes, tiny waist). Lastly, the movements of all three heroines are dainty, rather than sporty. Because they were constructed through the lens of classical ballet, as Bell (1995) notes, they walk and dance as ballerinas would – slowly, gracefully, tall and light on their feet. Cinderella and Aurora are seen waltzing with their princes, while Snow White rides sidesaddle atop Prince Charming’s horse on the way to his castle.

Most newer heroines tend to be the exact opposite of these women. Beginning with Ariel, newer characters take on a look that is more modern and unconventional than older characters, meaning that they wear pants or other attire different from traditional dresses and skirts. Ariel, for example, spends most of the film in a seashell bra, which appears to be the customary form of dress for mermaids, but it is still not what we would expect to see a Disney heroine wear. Similarly, Mulan leaves behind a traditional Chinese dress for the heavy metal and armor of a soldier’s uniform.

Additionally, though some newer heroines are drawn with pretty faces and frames, most seem to exude beauty and sex appeal. Ariel and Jasmine don attire that shows off their bare midriffs and miniscule waists. Jasmine’s low cut top accentuates her cleavage, and her large, dark, almond-shaped eyes make her look even more exotically beautiful. While Pocahontas’ dress never reveals her midriff, it does draw attention to her full bust, and especially her long legs, which she uses to straddle John Smith in one

scene of the film. This echoes the research of Celeste Lacroix (2004), who states that Pocahontas' blatant sex appeal marked the beginning of a completely different physical representation of the Disney heroine. Furthermore, Ariel and Pocahontas' long, flowing hair hangs loosely and freely around their faces, rather than it being pinned back neatly with a hair tie or headband. Character descriptions of these heroines have changed from "fair" and "grace" to "beautiful," "gorgeous," "a vision" and "desert bloom."

However, it must be noted that, if there were to exist a growing trend of beautiful, sexy heroines, it ended with *Mulan*. Her attire covers most of her body throughout the film, and her cleavage, waist and legs are in no way accentuated by what she wears. Indeed, one supporting character in the film describes her as "tough-looking," something no previous heroine has ever been called. Furthermore, in the one scene of the film in which *Mulan* actually tries to look like a suitable mate – clad in elaborate robes and makeup – she appears embarrassed and awkward.

A final physical quality shared by most newer Disney heroines is their ability to move in a more sporty, less delicate, manner. Many of them are quite athletic, jumping, running, swimming and climbing tall objects freely. Indeed, *Mulan* engages in combat, *Jasmine* is seen pole-vaulting from one rooftop to another and *Pocahontas* dives off cliffs, canoes through dangerous currents and performs somersaults without even batting an eye. Furthermore, though *Ariel* and *Belle* may still be seen dancing gracefully with their partners, just as *Cinderella* and *Aurora* did, Disney's three most recent heroines completely abandon ballroom dancing altogether.

Overall, the Disney Company offers a traditional, conservative view of its older heroines. These women wear non-revealing skirts and dresses, move delicately and

gracefully and possess a pretty, classical, stately type of beauty. Contrarily, newer heroines are clad in revealing clothing that accentuates their best physical features. They are often beautiful and sexually appealing, and they engage in more athletic activities than Disney's first heroines.

### Goals/Motivations

Heroine	Older/ Newer	First Goal	Motivation	Goal at Stake in Climax	Does Heroine Achieve This Goal?	Sentiment - Does/Does Not Achieve Goal	Romance?
Snow White	Older	Male-Centered	Romance	Romantic Relationship	Yes	Satisfied	In a relationship
Cinderella	Older	Other	Other	Romantic Relationship	Yes	Satisfied	Married
Aurora	Older	Male-Centered	Romance	Romantic Relationship	Yes	Satisfied	In a relationship
Ariel	Newer	<b>Self-Centered</b>	Self-Motivation	<b>Romantic Relationship</b>	Yes	Satisfied	Married
Belle	Newer	<b>Self-Centered</b>	Self-Motivation	<b>Romantic Relationship</b>	Yes	Satisfied	In a relationship
Jasmine	Newer	<b>Self-Centered</b>	Self-Motivation	<b>Romantic Relationship</b>	Yes	Satisfied	In a relationship
Pocahontas	Newer	<b>Self-Centered</b>	Self-Motivation	<b>Romantic Relationship</b>	No	<b>Unsatisfied</b>	<b>Single</b>
Mulan	Newer	Other-Centered	Responsibility	Acceptance from Others	Yes	Satisfied	In a relationship

These results reflect the old adage that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Older heroines Snow White and Aurora both begin their films voicing a desire to enter into a romantic relationship with a particular man. Indeed, in the very first song in her film, Snow White sings, "I'm wishing for the one I love to find me today" (Disney & Hand, 1937). In addition, the first time we sense that *Sleeping Beauty's* Briar Rose truly desires something, she has just been told that she is not a peasant girl, but is instead Princess Aurora; therefore, she must never again see the handsome stranger whom she has just met in the woods (Disney & Geronimi, 1959). The primary goals of Disney's

older heroines are thus predominantly male-centered, with the possible exception of Cinderella, whose first goal is to attend the royal ball. (It must be noted, however, that the purpose for attending the ball is to meet and potentially become the prince's bride, so an argument can be made that Cinderella's goal is, indeed, male-centered.)

The evolution of these heroines has made it so that Disney's newer protagonists do not voice a longing to be romantically linked to a man when they are first introduced to viewers. Instead, most of these heroines first express a desire to be free from the life or system that they feel entraps them. They long to broaden their horizons and grow intellectually. This longing is most apparent in such songs as "Part of Your World," in which Ariel bemoans her life as a mermaid and voices a strong desire to be human: "Up where they walk, up where they run, up where they stay all day in the sun wanderin' free, wish I could be part of that world" (Ashman et al. & Clements et al., 1989). Additionally, a frustrated Belle believes that "there must be more than this provincial life" as she sings of her desire to "have someone understand, I want so much more than they've got planned" (Ashman et al. & Trousdale et al., 1991). This strengthens the arguments of scholars like Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (2004), who states that newer heroines begin their films questioning societal norms and longing to make a change from the domesticated lives they have been instructed to lead. Simultaneously, it refutes the research of such scholars as Kathi Maio (1998) and Brenda Ayres (1999), both of whom state that underneath their superficial differences, Disney heroines want nothing more out of life than to marry and settle down.

According to the results of the content analysis, the only newer heroine with a different type of goal is Mulan. Rather than voicing a desire to act against what is

expected of her, she aims to make her family proud. She feels it is her responsibility to bring honor to her family. She confesses this desire in the song “Honor to Us All”: “Ancestors, hear my plea. Help me not to make a fool of me and to not uproot my family tree. Keep my father standing tall” (Coats & Bancroft et al., 1999). The research of Gillian Youngs (1999) rings true in these lyrics. Youngs states that though Mulan does break traditional gender boundaries by fighting in the Chinese army, she does so entirely on behalf of her family, rather than to discover her own capabilities and self-worth.

The nature of these first goals, however, is where the heroines’ differences end and their similarities begin. As the results demonstrate, by the time these films reach their climaxes, the goal at stake for most of these heroines is a romantic relationship. This is unsurprising for Disney’s first three heroines, since most of them begin their films with this goal in mind. However, four out of five of Disney’s newer heroines transform during their films from women in search of freedom and intellectual growth to women in search of a man to love.

Ariel, for example, seems to abandon her initial desire for freedom as soon as she meets Prince Eric. She then begins to act with one objective in mind: to spend the rest of her life with the man of her dreams. Personal growth and fulfillment seem to have taken a backseat to this new goal. This is made evident through Ariel’s own words. At the start of the film, Ariel defends the human world to her family and friends with such remarks as, “They’re not barbarians!” and “I don’t see how a world that makes such wonderful things could be bad.” Yet, in one scene after Eric has entered her life, she argues once again with her father over the dangers posed by humans. When her father describes them as, “spineless, savage, harpooning fish-eaters,” she responds with,

“Daddy, I love him!” Furthermore, at the film’s climax, while Ursula the Sea Witch threatens to take over the ocean, Ariel utters merely one word throughout the entire scene: “Eric!” (Ashman et al. & Clements et al., 1989). She no longer seems concerned with whether or not she will have the chance to explore new horizons as a human. As Regina Bendix (1993) and Roberta Trites (1991) suggest, her main priority at this point in the film appears to be the future of her relationship with Eric.

An even more interesting result was discovered with the film *Pocahontas*. This heroine begins her film a “free spirit,” as she is affectionately called by members of her tribe (Pentecost & Gabriel, M. et al., 1995). She rejects the notion of marrying Kocoum, the tribe’s strongest warrior, and instead pines for a life that allows her to choose her own path. However, just as Ariel’s goals change once she is introduced to Prince Eric, Pocahontas undergoes a similar transformation when she first encounters John Smith. Her main focus is no longer to remain a “free spirit;” she now concerns herself mainly with her love for John. For instance, when John is held captive for murdering Kocoum, she weeps not because of the imminent war that will erupt between her tribe and the English settlers, but because “all this happened because of me, and now I’ll never see John Smith again” (Pentecost & Gabriel, M. et al., 1995). In addition, when she leaps to protect John from the deadly blow of her father’s tomahawk at the climax of the film, she does not yell, “This is wrong!” or “We need peace!” but rather, “I love him, Father!” (Pentecost & Gabriel, M. et al., 1995).

This is a bit ironic given the fact that at the film’s end, Pocahontas abandons a relationship with John and instead stays in Virginia with her tribe, making her the only Disney heroine to remain completely single. Because of this, scholars such as Jill Henke

et al. (1996) have dubbed her a pioneer, claiming that Pocahontas' happiness "is not determined by whom she marries, but by her own discovery of selfhood" (p. 242). However, it is important to note Lauren Dundes' assertion (2001) that simply because Pocahontas chooses to be romantically unattached does not mean she does not *want* a romantic relationship and does not pursue it as a goal throughout most of the film. At the conclusion of the film, a wounded John Smith asks her to accompany him back to England. With a somewhat pained expression on her face, she says, "I'm needed here" (Pentecost & Gabriel, M. et al., 1995). This suggests that she sacrifices her happiness to do what she feels is right and remain with her tribe. Though many would consider such an act altruistic and commendable, it still must be noted that parting from John Smith and remaining in Virginia to lead her tribe does not appear to be Pocahontas' main desire at any point in the film.

Some may argue that in choosing to be with the ones they love, these heroines are, in fact, rejecting what is expected of them and living the life they choose. Indeed, each of the heroines' love interests – Eric, a human; the Beast, who lives in an enchanted castle; Aladdin, a derelict; and John Smith, an Englishman – represent what the heroines' respective societies forbid. However, it still must be noted that Ariel, Belle, Jasmine and Pocahontas all begin their journeys wanting to broaden their horizons, yet as soon as they meet their significant others, the viewer gets the impression that the only thing that will make them happy – and therefore, the only goal they seem to pursue – is to be with their love interests. They abandon the notion that another other lifestyle may offer them happiness and fulfillment.

The only newer heroine whose goal does not change during the course of her film is Mulan. As previously stated, her story begins with her wanting to bring honor to her family. When she realizes she will likely not achieve this goal by becoming an obedient, dutiful wife, she poses as a soldier and takes her injured father's place in the Chinese war against the Huns. At the film's climax, she attempts to save her country from this hostile group, and when she succeeds, she earns the praise and respect of the Emperor. Her father then embraces her and says, "The greatest gift and honor is having you for a daughter" (Coats & Bancroft et al., 1999), at which Mulan weeps happily. Throughout the entire movie, her attention is focused on bringing honor to her family, and in the end, she accomplishes that goal. However, it is worthwhile to note that she does end her film in an implied romantic relationship with Captain Shang, though that is not the objective she pursues. Indeed, Mulan appears disappointed in one scene in which she realizes Shang may not be interested in her, suggesting that, though her main priority is not to find love, she does still desire it.

Disney's heroines are first introduced to viewers with a variety of goals in sight. Those of the Walt Disney era desire a romantic relationship. Overtime, they have evolved into heroines who pine for a life free of societal expectations, or the pride and respect of family and friends. However, as these films progress, the differences among these heroines appear to disintegrate as older and newer heroines alike work toward romantic relationships, despite what their initial goals may have been. Even those who do not set their sights on love often achieve it in the end; those who do not seem unsatisfied. Despite how these characters may have evolved, a clear message is



communicated: regardless of whatever else one may accomplish in life, one cannot be completely satisfied if he/she is devoid of romantic love.

### **Conclusion**

As the content analysis indicates, Disney's animated heroines have evolved in such a way that they are now more willing to take charge of their own destinies as agents, rather than assuming the more passive role of a bystander. Because of this, they have become more questioning of the norms that govern their societies. While Disney's first heroines are largely compliant and accepting, later heroines are more willing to reject societal expectations if what they want conflicts with those expectations. They are also more determined to stand up for their goals, even in the face of adversity, though they may still depend on others to help them achieve them. Physically, newer heroines are depicted as more sexually appealing than older heroines, as their chests, waists, legs and eyes are often accentuated, and their agility and athleticism are emphasized. However, one critical thread tying together older and newer heroines alike is their affinity with romantic relationships. Even those who do not pursue this as a goal achieve it nonetheless. Though they have evolved into women who now pursue other goals **before** they set their sights on romantic love, the fact that romantic love is still the ultimate goal of most of these heroines communicates to viewers that one who remains unmatched with a significant other will likely be emotionally incomplete and unfulfilled.

## **Chapter V: Conclusion**

The results concerning how Disney's animated heroines have evolved may raise questions about exactly why they are depicted in such a manner. For example, why do heroines created in the Walt Disney era differ so strongly in some respects from those created after Walt Disney's death? Why do these characters continue to prioritize romantic relationships, despite how much they have evolved otherwise?

### **Possible Explanations**

Some may believe that since many of the Disney Company's films are based on pre-existing fairy tales, myth or historical fact (i.e. *Snow White*, *Pocahontas*), the company must have used these as guidelines for creating their films. Indeed, Jack Zipes (1995) notes that Walt Disney retained the essence of the Grimms' version of *Snow White*, as both versions depict a domestic princess willing to clean, cook and keep house for the seven dwarfs in exchange for shelter. However, much of these tales have, in fact, been altered to more easily fit the "Disney formula." For example, as Roberta Trites (1991) states, Disney's version of *The Little Mermaid* is quite different from the original Hans Christian Anderson version. Anderson's mermaid pines for an immortal soul, and she becomes a human to achieve this lofty goal. In the end, she does not earn the love of the prince, but she does earn the soul that she so badly wants. Disney's Ariel longs for life ashore, and later becomes human merely so that she can be with her prince. At the film's end, she does earn his love, which gives the film its happy ending. Additionally, Ziauddin Sardar (1996-1997) believes Pocahontas to be the most sexually endowed of all of the females who appear in the film. The real Pocahontas looked nothing like the full-chested, long-legged princess we see in the movie.

Many scholars attribute the portrayal of these heroines to the personal ideals and beliefs of Walt Disney himself. Pamela Colby O'Brien (1996) is one such scholar. She states that Walt Disney's views regarding family life and social order were so strongly infused into the company that many of them to this day are still alive in Disney films. These views, she continues, were largely shaped by the cultural ideals of the 1940s regarding the roles women should play within society. According to O'Brien, Walt Disney considered women inferior and secondary to men. He also strongly idealized the nuclear family and believed that a proper woman should be graceful, charming and domestic if she was to be happy and fulfilled, which may explain why his first three heroines epitomized these qualities.

Others place Disney's films in the context of the era in which they were created to explain these characters' depictions. Brenda Ayres (1999) notes the state of the world during the time *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was released. At this time, the Second World War was on the horizon. With the world in such chaos, audiences counted on the stability of the nuclear family for comfort and expected to see this ideal played out in their escapist entertainment. O'Brien (1996) adds that the onset of the Cold War furthered this need.

Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario (2004) extends this view to *Sleeping Beauty's* Aurora. She states that Aurora's decade – the 1950s – introduced the world to the first true American teenagers, which may explain why the 16-year-old princess first meets her prince, then centers all her thoughts around him, just as real world teens did with their own celebrity heartthrobs. Do Rozario also speculates that the reason Disney's older heroines were so passive and accepting in nature is because at the time, femme fatales

such as those portrayed on screen by Bette Davis and Joan Crawford were typically the ones who challenged patriarchal order and created tension within films. Therefore, in *Snow White*, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, it is the female villains who create chaos and disorder, while it is the heroines' role to remain quiet and obedient (2004). This particular film prototype has become obsolete throughout the decades, which could explain why the heroines are now the ones to challenge order and stir controversy within their films. Finally, Nicole Arthur (1995) makes the point that Cinderella's domesticity mirrors the expectations of the family-oriented ideals of the 1950s, while Pocahontas' physical beauty reflects what contemporary America finds sexy and attractive, making Disney's heroines true products of their times.

A third angle that could help explain the heroines' portrayals is the characters' cultures. Some of their actions, considered questionable by contemporary America, may have been perfectly acceptable and even expected within the societies in which they lived. For example, at the end of her film, Pocahontas chooses the needs of her tribe over her love for John Smith. As Celeste Lacroix (2004) notes, this act of sacrifice represents America's Indian heroine. Her Native American ethnicity and culture, she says, are directly related to her actions throughout the film, which suggests that going to England with John and deserting her tribe may have been atypical of an Indian princess' nature. Similarly, while our own culture may frown upon Mulan's intense desire to bring pride and honor to her family – rather than enlisting in the army and fighting as a soldier for her own self-fulfillment – perhaps such a goal is justified by the typically relationship-oriented nature of the Chinese.

### **The Future of Disney's Animated Heroines**

In 2006, the Walt Disney Company acquired Pixar Animation Studios. Known for its state-of-the-art computer animation and digital effects, Pixar's box office successes have included *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo* and *Monsters, Inc.* What Pixar has yet to release, however, is a film with a prominent female protagonist. The female characters in its previous films are either secondary (i.e. *Finding Nemo*) or part of a larger, more collective cast of characters (i.e. *The Incredibles*). This suggests that Disney heroines like the ones analyzed in this study will likely be few and far between in years to come. However, the Disney/Pixar merger will probably operate under a whole new set of beliefs and ideals different from those Walt Disney set standard for his company nearly 80 years ago. This can be deduced given America's more liberal views, the continued rise of feminism and the introduction of a brand new animation company unfamiliar with the Walt Disney tradition. Thus, if there are plans to introduce the nation to a brand new Disney/Pixar heroine, it is probable that she will be dissimilar from those created long before her. She will likely be independent, determined, rebellious, not so prone to romantic relationships and may even more closely resemble contemporary Americans in the physical sense than previous heroines (consider, for example, *The Incredibles'* Elastigirl's wider hips and trendy "bob" haircut).

Whatever may become of the Disney heroines of the future, one thing remains clear: these timeless characters continue to be a popular yet controversial part of children's entertainment. Throughout the decades, they have done more than offer viewers a temporary escape into the fantasy world of beautiful princesses, handsome Prince Charmings, loathsome villains and happily-ever-afters. They have infiltrated

virtually every aspect of popular culture, from television to the Broadway stage, from theme parks to a wide variety of clothing, toys and other merchandise. Along the way, they have communicated messages of which goals to pursue in life, how to respond to authority and societal expectations, how active a role one should play in his/her own destiny and how to dress, speak and move. Though the widespread influence of these characters will likely never fade, viewers may nonetheless ponder what “a whole new world” of heroines could bring in the years to come.

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