Evolutions in the Depiction of a Disney Princess
A Film Essay

Research Question: How do the decisions of the directors create a change in the depiction of princesses in film over time by using filmic techniques, and to what extent does this portrayal challenge the objectification of women?

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Abstract

The underlying question behind my essay was “how do the decisions of the directors create a change in the depiction of princesses in film over time by using filmic techniques, and to what extent does this portrayal challenge the objectification of women?” I chose to focus on the first Disney princess film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and the latest, *Tangled*. With my research, I hoped to investigate the effect time had on the portrayal of the two different women and whether the individuals working on the Disney princess films now challenge the issues of gender equality.

The investigation was approached by first conducting research into general filmic techniques to get a greater sense of the demands of the subject. I then watched the primary sources, in this case Disney films, and noted changes between the two movies in terms of the characterization of the princesses and how this was shown based on the filmic techniques that I had learned. Finally, I found secondary sources that provided evidence for the theories I might have on the body language, the symbolism or any other aspects of the film.

Ultimately, I found that although there are key differences between the directors’ portrayals of Snow White and Rapunzel, there are still elements that reinforce the gender stereotypes. The films only challenge the objectification of women and gender stereotypes to a partial extent. Nevertheless, having analyzed the evolution, I am positive that Disney is moving, however slowly, towards a portrayal of equality between prince and princesses and am hopeful that Disney princess movies will eventually convey messages that perpetuate ideas of self-confidence and a sense of worth that does not come from one’s relationships.

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I. Introduction

In the seventy-three years between the release of the first Disney princess film and the franchise’s latest movie, it is evident that the techniques used to create the film have evolved alongside the changes in society itself. But it is debatable whether there has been any real difference in the depiction of the two Disney princesses in the 1937 film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and in the 2010 film, *Tangled*. This essay will explore the way the films’ directors, David Hand in *Snow White* and both Nathan Greno and Byron Howard in *Tangled*, treat the construction of the lead female character and the differences between them.

More specifically, how do the decisions of the directors create a change in the depiction of princesses in film over time by using filmic techniques, and to what extent does this portrayal challenge the objectification of women?

Disney’s portrayal of women has evolved to challenge the objectification of women to a partial extent, evident from the change in characterization of Disney’s first princess, Snow White, to that of Rapunzel. From the art, the mise-en-scène, the use of animals, the music, and the composition of shots, the evolution shows the transition of princesses from static characters only linked with the domestic, to relatively more confident women. A transition that, while not yet complete, hopefully will continue until a strong Disney princess is achieved.

II. Character Art

An important element when looking at the representation of the princesses in the films is the concept designs on the protagonists. Despite the number of years between releases, the artwork is markedly similar.

Professor Gail Dines, who teaches Women’s Studies at Wheelock College, asserts that much of Disney’s art stays the same, with highly sexualized females with “tiny waists” and “fluttering eyelashes” (*Mickey Mouse Monopoly*). She claims that such art promotes the wrong notion of femininity and that the notions pervade all of Disney, rather than merely its initial films.
In fact, when we look at the images of Snow White (Image 1) and Rapunzel (Image 2) side by side, this observation seems to hold true. The animators have not created much of a difference between the designs of the two women.

Both princesses, of similar height, have almost similar proportions, although Rapunzel is more petite than her predecessor and has a narrower waist and body. In contrast, Snow White is plumper and shorter. Snow White’s art is reminiscent of the “1920’s babydoll” trend amongst animated characters like Betty Boop while Rapunzel, with her body shape and long blonde hair, is in line with the twentieth-century ideals of beauty: both designs reflect images of women popular at the time (“The Women of Disney”). Thus there is no real change in Disney’s attempts to challenge gender stereotypes.

Similarly, though Snow White’s attire is more gender-balanced as it contains a mix of the three primary colors, Rapunzel’s dress is purple and pink, the latter of which is a color attributed to girls (Masters). This unfortunately supports the stereotypes our culture has on the colors of femininity.

Greno and Howard caused very little change between the designs of the characters in Tangled and in Snow White. The change that does exist, with the colors, reinforces gender
stereotypes *more*. In these ways, the films fail to challenge the objectification of women, portraying a flawed definition of femininity rather than the typical body shapes of society.

### III. Symbolism and Anthropomorphism

The directors have changed in their portrayal of the princesses through their use of the animals linked to the women. These animals often reflect the emotions of the protagonists themselves.

Throughout the film, Hand links Snow White to doves, by having them in the same scene. Birds have been symbols linked to women for more than a century, reinforcing a gender stereotype. In the opening scene, when Snow White is peaceful, the doves calmly roost; when the prince startles her, the doves fly away hurriedly (Figure 3); and when the prince serenades her, Snow White sends him a blushing bird in response (Figure 4). The connection Hand creates between Snow White and her doves reveals her personality. Generally, doves are connoted with purity (due to their white color), love, and hopefulness (Werness, 144-145). These characteristics are stereotypically linked to the female gender.

![Figure 3](image1.png) ![Figure 4](image2.png)

There is a clear change in Greno and Howard’s choice of animal symbolism, with Pascal the chameleon as Rapunzel’s companion. Unlike the birds in Snow White, Greno and Howard use anthropomorphism, or attribution of human characteristics to objects or animals that would otherwise be unable to express such depth of character (Koehler, 22). Pascal often
shows very human emotions or does human actions which, like the birds, reflect Rapunzel’s emotions. When she longs to go out, he helpfully encourages her to leave, and when she is sad, he literally turns blue to sympathize with her feelings (Figure 6). But Pascal is given more human characteristics than Snow White’s birds (Figure 5).

Unlike birds, chameleons aren’t typically seen as companions for females. In fact, as reptiles, chameleons would be one of the animals that females want to avoid touching. Greno and Howard subvert the expectation of females linked to gender-specific animals and thus challenge the gender stereotypes of women.

Perhaps the initial symbolism of the chameleon that the animators wanted was the chameleon as the symbol of using the sun’s power (Werness, 82-83). Throughout the film, the sun is an important recurring motif that supports the theme of seeing the truth. But interestingly enough, chameleons are also a symbol of the ability to adapt and to climb to attain one’s goals. Unlike the traditional “feminine” values of purity and love, the directors’ change of animal symbolism to the chameleon conveys different values to Tangled’s audiences, and thus challenges the objectification of women in princess films.

IV. Mise-en-scène

The directors’ change in depiction of Snow White and Rapunzel is also evident in the change of the recurring objects in the mise-en-scène. According to the Yale Film Studies Program, the mise-en-scène comprises of the “proximity, size and proportions of… objects in a film… manipulated through camera placement and lenses, lighting, décor” to determine “relationships between elements in the diegetic world”. These objects are motifs which
reflect the themes of the respective films; they relate to the princesses, and ultimately emphasize whether their characters are static or dynamic.

Hand portrays Snow White as a static character, or, according to McGraw-Hill Higher Education, “characters who remain essentially the same… because the action does not have an important effect on their lives or because they are insensitive to the meaning of the action” (“Glossary”). The motifs of wishing the animators use are continually reinforced, so that Snow White never really learns anything from her experiences. At the beginning of the film, it has already been established that Snow White’s goal in life is to find her one true love. Patience and hope are two traits which recur in Snow White, and they are epitomized by the first important object that appears: the wishing well.

When Hand places the wishing well in the scene, the well dominates the scene by having the camera’s point of view on either the other side of Snow White (Figure 7) or actually inside the well (Figure 8). Hand creates the effect of almost framing Snow White between the well’s two pillars or within the well. This relationship between the elements of the well and Snow White describes the motif of wishing as something which dominates Snow White’s personality. Hand’s placement of the well emphasizes the importance of believing in wishing.

Ironically, the second object which ties into the themes is the fruit which leads to her enchanted sleep, the poisoned apple. In the scene where the apple appears, both the characters are in relatively low light or dark clothing, while the apple is bright and framed in the center
Hand emphasizes the placement of the apple and the object’s importance as a recurring motif, because Snow White is deceived into thinking that the apple is a magic wishing apple. In the scene where Snow White is actually making a wish on the apple (Figure 10), the analysis of the mise-en-scène is important. Hand ensures that there is nothing colorful or distracting in the background, so the attention of the audience is focused on the vibrant, red apple. By linking the wishing well and wishing apple to the princess, Hand characterizes Snow White as someone who believes in the power of waiting for true love to happen and that it will conquer all. At the end, her wedding dreams come true, and Snow White, a static character, never wavers from her beliefs, showing a flawed expectation of females’ dreams.

In stark comparison, Greno and Howard change in their depiction of Disney princesses by portraying Rapunzel as a dynamic character, or, “characters who… undergo some important change in personality, attitude, or outlook on life as a result of the action of the film” (“Glossary”). In Tangled, the animators use the theme of being blind to the truth and eventually seeing the light, a motif reinforced by the symbol of the mirror. In Figure 11, the scene is significant as Rapunzel looks at herself in the mirror and is blinded from the truth. In fact, analyzing the mise-en-scène, the directors place Mother Gothel behind the mirror, with her hands on the mirror. She surreptitiously controls the parts of the reflection that Rapunzel sees, symbolizing how the older woman manipulates Rapunzel’s knowledge. The
surrounding area around the mirror is essentially darkness, reflecting Rapunzel’s blindness to the truths. The overall composition emphasizes Rapunzel’s initial ignorance.

Greno and Hand later come back to this motif to emphasize the way the character of Rapunzel is dynamic. Unlike Snow White, through the action of the plot, Rapunzel comes to the realization that, unlike what Mother Gothel insinuated, Rapunzel is not helpless. When Rapunzel finally shows a drastic change in character by confronting Mother Gothel about all the lies that surrounds her life, it is accompanied by the mirror’s toppling over (Figure 12). The surroundings of the mirror are equally grey and bleak, heightening the darker tone of the film at the end. Ultimately, the directors use the symbolic breaking of the mirror as a representation of how Rapunzel confronted Mother Gothel and her lies, challenging the portrayal of women as helpless.

![Figure 11](image1.png)  ![Figure 12](image2.png)

By characterizing Rapunzel as a person who learns from her experiences and becomes more mature, Greno and Howard use the change to challenge the perpetuation of women stereotypes.

**V. Music**

While the directors’ choice to change the background score of the two films challenges the way women are expected to react in the face of their fears, the lyrics in their iconic songs perpetuates the unrealistic ideals of dreams centered around a relationship.

The difference in the directors’ use of the score during frightening scenes in *Tangled* and in *Snow White* emphasizes the change in Disney’s portrayal of the princesses.
Snow White, when faced with her fears, is portrayed as the typical “damsel in distress”, a film stereotype that was common in 30s films. Although the empowerment of women started in the late 30s and 40s, the perpetuation of the female archetype was common (Erish). The music playing throughout the scene follows Snow White’s flight through the forest and underscores her defenselessness. Paul J. Smith and Leigh Harline, who composed the score, use a frenetic pace with a symphony orchestra to convey Snow White’s panic by increasing the listeners’ heart rate. It should also be noted that the composers used strings and woodwinds to create a haunting tune. The overall music is loud, almost overwhelming; it creates the impression of a panicked journey that the audience experiences alongside Snow White, and neither the audience members nor Snow White seems to have control over the situation.

Hand pairs the fast music with animation effects, similar to a “camera shake” in real film. Camera shakes happen in scenes when the camera would move quickly in several directions, producing the impression an impact (Toon Boom Animation). The director uses an equivalent where short bursts of zoomed-in scenes create tension and highlight Snow White’s fright as the film takes on her point of view. Overall, the fear caused by the music and filmic techniques perpetuate the female stereotype of Snow White as a damsel in distress.

In comparison, Greno and Howard use the presence of the score only during some of the scene to portray Rapunzel as calmer under pressure than Snow White. Like Smith and Harline, Alan Menken, who composed the score for Tangled, introduces the music of an orchestra to set the tone for Rapunzel’s fear. But unlike in Snow White, the movie only has the ominous music at a few certain parts of the scene. It plays at the beginning of the scene and when the action reaches its climax as the bandits grow violent.

On one hand, like the music in Snow White, the growing crescendo used creates feelings of growing fear within the audience. On the other hand, the directors’ choice of strategic music placement in important parts, rather than the overwhelming music in the entire scene in Snow White, emphasizes a different portrayal of Rapunzel’s character. The instances without music, when she eventually confronts the men, underlies when Rapunzel chooses to fight her fears, challenging gender stereotypes.
Also, the camera effect is different. While Hand had used camera shake effects to emulate impacts and inspire fear within the audience, the transitions between the cut sections in *Tangled* are clear, emphasizing a less chaotic state of mind when Rapunzel faces her fears.

Ultimately, when people are faced with their fears, they are often faced with a psychological mechanism called fight-or-flight. The choice of fight or flight when faced with one’s fears provides insight into the princesses’ personalities as either helpless, or strong and empowered (Martin). Through the parallels between the score and the actions of the protagonist, it is clear that Snow White chooses to flee in the face of danger, and Rapunzel chooses the more aggressive route and fights. The change in the depiction of their princesses thus challenges the objectification of women, since the directors portray Rapunzel as a fighter.

There has also been a change in the iconic songs connected to Snow White and Rapunzel, as popular music in society has similarly evolved. Nevertheless, it can be argued that there has not been a significant change in the lyrics that the films’ respective songwriters, Frank Churchill and Alan Menken, convey using the lyrics.

In the iconic song “Some Day My Prince Will Come”, Snow White sings about her love for the Prince and how they will eventually live happily ever after. The song ties back into the motif of wishing and waiting. In the lyrics, Churchill uses the repetition of “some day” to emphasize the patient nature that women are expected to have. Churchill also repeatedly uses the imagery of “spring” and “birds” in his lyrics, both of which link to a time after winter, to again stress the importance of waiting for this “some day” (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). Through the choice of the song, Hand characterizes Snow White as a girl whose aim is to be wed and get carried away to his castle, ideals that reinforce gender stereotypes because girls are the passive half in a relationship.

Like in *Snow White*, the iconic song in *Tangled*, “I See The Light”, is a love song and deals with the message of being with the one you love. In this scene, Rapunzel and Flynn have finally seen the lights of the lanterns that floated on Rapunzel’s birthday. The song reflects the themes and motifs that are emphasized throughout the film. In the case of Rapunzel’s song, this would be the motif of previously being blind and now seeing the light. Indeed, Menken adds numerous references to sources of light in his lyrics, such as “windows”, “starlight” and “bright” (*Tangled*). All of these words, which allude to freedom,
are connoted positively. They can be seen as a symbol of the realization that Rapunzel and Flynn love each one another. In this respect, the message of Menken’s lyrics have not changed much from the songs of his predecessors. Ultimately, “I See The Light” still expresses the change in a girl’s life from falling in love, a message that supports the continuation of the objectification of women.

VI. The Composition (The Beginning)

Through the body language of the protagonists through the first time they meet each other, and the composition of the scenes, the directors show a partial change in the relationship dynamics of the couples in the two films.

From their first meeting, Hand uses the body language between Snow White and the Prince to show that the Prince has the upper hand (Figure 13). In the scene, Snow White’s hands are in front of her, creating a physical barrier between her and the Prince. This emphasizes her initial fear, as the hands show her desire for distance (Murzynski and Degelman). It is the Prince who is more dominant in terms of body language and his portrayal in the composition, as he confidently reaches out. A little later, Snow White is running away from him (Figure 14). Again, this establishes that the prince has the upper hand in their meeting, but Hand also portrays Snow White with a stance that is less stable. Finally, the composition of the scene is telling of their relationship; the Prince is taller than Snow White and, as a taller man, looks down on her.
Unlike in *Snow White*, Rapunzel and Flynn meet under more equal circumstances. The first time they meet each other, Rapunzel has hit the man unconscious with her frying pan, and ties him up (Figure 15). The situation already created is one where Rapunzel has the upper hand. Greno and Howard also use stronger body language—with Rapunzel’s wide stance and set shoulders—to highlight the more confrontational nature of Rapunzel’s personality. The composition is also such that Rapunzel can look Flynn in the eye (Figure 15), or even look down on him in a close-up shot (Figure 16).

However, this is only a partial difference; throughout the whole ordeal, Flynn is smiling. Screenwriter Dan Fogelman uses dialogue that characterizes Flynn as lighthearted and joking, with Flynn often calling Rapunzel the casual moniker of “Blondie” and even initially informing her, as though he were in the dominant position, “Here's the deal”. His body language in the scene is as forward despite being tied down and he does not lean back into his chair, showing self-assurance (Figure 15). It seems as though Flynn is humoring Rapunzel. Greno and Howard give the impression that Rapunzel is not entirely dominant, showing a change that only partially challenges the issues of equality between genders.

![Figure 15](image1.png)  ![Figure 16](image2.png)

**VII. The Composition (The Development)**

In *Snow White*, the protagonist essentially meets the Prince at the beginning of the film, falls in love with him at the beginning, and marries him at the end. Aside from a song Snow White sings, there is no development of a relationship between the two. In this respect, the directors of *Tangled* already show a great change between the two films. But, in their
choices of the composition of the scenes between Rapunzel and Flynn, Greno and Howard fail to challenge the objectification of women.

In one scene, Rapunzel and Flynn are in the middle of sharing Flynn’s history as Eugene Fitzherbert (Figure 17). Greno and Howard, using the composition of the scene, create an intimate mood between the two. The couple is drawn lit up from a light source that is on screen, the flickering fireplace. This creates a romantic tone. Rapunzel and Flynn’s bodies are also angled towards each other and slightly to the camera, creating an inviting picture between them as they make eye contact. Flynn Rider still looks down on Rapunzel in the first scene, and Rapunzel’s body language, with crossed legs and her chin propped on her hands, still shows an flirtatious interest that does little to dispel gender stereotypes.

In another scene, although it is in broad daylight, it does not seem any less romantic as the composition has Flynn and Rapunzel very close to each other (Figure 18). The animators draw Flynn’s right hand protectively near Rapunzel’s waist, making her seem more like a conquest than a companion (Murzynski and Degelman). The action only perpetuates the objectification of women.

When Rapunzel and Flynn first come to the village, they spend a day doing all the typical activities of the festival. The directors pass the time by using a montage of small scenes. As a whole, the montage is generally well-lighted, bright and lively, accompanied by bright music that reflects the happiness both of them feel at their growing relationship. It is interesting to note that Greno and Howard intersperse scenes of the activities with a huge dance in the middle, wherein Rapunzel and Flynn try to dance closer and closer to one
another until it finally culminates in a shot where they are in an embrace (Figure 19). The dance represents their growing closeness and eventual love.

In the composition of the final shot, the directors place the two together in the middle of the screen, separate from the crowd behind them, highlighting the importance of each other. Composition-wise, Rapunzel and Flynn are in the foreground and are colored brightly compared to the rest of the villagers. The way is only concentrated on Flynn as she looks up at him, only supports the idea that if a girl is in love, she is immersed with it over all else. So, the directors fail to challenge the objectification of women.

![Figure 19](image)

**VIII. The Composition (The Ending)**

At the end, there often is an emotional climax where the lovers affirm their affection for one another after one of them almost loses the other. The animators of *Tangled* end up partially subverting the expectations of the prince rescuing his princess that was created in *Snow White*.

With Snow White, the ending seems straightforward. The princess is in an enchanted sleep, and the Prince’s kiss is the catalyst to wake her up (Figure 20). The composition of the scene is created so that the focus is on the kiss. The background is plain and unobtrusive. Hand also places the prince so that he looms over Snow White. The perpetuation of gender stereotypes is worsened when we see how the Prince takes Snow White back to his castle—by carrying her (Figure 21). This emphasizes Snow White’s helplessness in the face of a man.
At the end, the animators of *Tangled* partially redeem themselves in the composition of the final, emotional climax between Rapunzel and Flynn. In one scene, the animators created a composition where Rapunzel is the one who is hovering over the prone, vulnerable body (Figure 22). This is in stark contrast to the previous screenshot of *Snow White*, where it was the prince who must “save” Snow White. Unlike *Snow White*, it is the man who is in the weak position at the end. Greno and Howard strengthen this idea with the presence of Flynn’s chained hand in the foreground, reminding the audience that Flynn is in a weak position.

But the directors do not completely challenge the objectification of women. Later, when Flynn wakes up, Rapunzel hugs him (Figure 23). Greno and Howard create a composition that really juxtaposes Rapunzel’s petite body against Flynn’s solid frame. In doing so, the animators remind the audience of Rapunzel’s fragility and femininity. They do not completely discard the objectification of women and so *Tangled* only partially challenges the issue.
IX. Conclusion

The directors of the two films, David Hand from Snow White and Nathan Greno and Byron Howard from Tangled, have evidently made conscious differences in the characterizations of their respective princesses. It’s evident that the art, the music, the composition and the elements of the films all have their respective differences between the two films. But not all the changes challenge the preconceived gender stereotypes; the changes only challenge the objectification of women partially.

The results of the essay further question, however, how the perpetuating of gender stereotypes is because the objectification of women actually appeals to the audience. Maybe Disney chooses not to create women that are too independent because such ideals do not appeal to today’s society. Maybe we are only creating a vicious cycle, with films pleasing the audience who grow up and are, in turn, enamored by unrealistic expectations in relationships.

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Works Cited


