

# The Change of Female Role Portrayal in Fairy Tale Films

## Analyzing Snow White and Maleficent

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**Abstract:** The well-known Disney's film studios have portrayed many impressive feminine characters in a series of animated movies over the time, while the portrayal of role character somehow can imply the gender consciousness. So this paper is intended to give two groups of analysis about the change of feminine character representation from the Disney movies over the time. One comparative case study is about princess Snow White from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs(1937)and Snow White and the Huntsman(2012), the other is female villain Maleficent from Sleeping Beauty(1959)and Maleficent(2014).This study was conducted by the method of textual analysis to give a qualitative research into the four movies. It was found that the portrayal of princess and female villain both has changed in 21st century. Snow White in 2012 has become independent, toughened, and emancipated compared with the version in 1937, when male chauvinism has prevailed. Moreover, Maleficent in 2014 was no longer just a simple vicious image than in 1989. The film has given audiences a more comprehensive understanding about her bad behavior. The transformation of Disney's female characters is a reflection of the development of feminism and an improvement of women's status.

**Keywords:** Disney movie; Snow White; Maleficent; Feminism

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. General background

There is a common belief that film, as part of media, often reflects the social reality. And the portrayal of role character in films even can imply the gender consciousness. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937) is the first full-length animated feature film produced by Walt Disney Productions and also is the earliest Disney animated feature film. It was adapted into live-action movie Snow White and the Huntsman in 2012. What's more, inspired by 1959 animated film Sleeping Beauty, Disney made Maleficent in 2014. And it was a commercial success, becoming the fourth-highest-grossing film of 2014. The study will give two groups of comparative analysis about the four movies, trying to reveal the change of role portrayal of Snow White and Maleficent over the time.

### 1.2. Purpose of the study

This study not only discusses the different portrayal of princess Snow White in Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and Snow White and the Huntsman, but also the vicious fairy Maleficent from Sleeping Beauty and Maleficent. Films more or less imply the gender consciousness. So this paper aims to find the answers to the questions: "In keeping with the progress made by women in society, whether changes in the portrayal of female gender

er have kept pace in the Disney films? Does the portrayal of female antagonist has changed over the time?"

### 1.3. Methodology

In terms of the collection of the four movies, the video materials are downloaded from legal website. So the version of films is accurate and authoritative. Based on the feminism theory, this paper makes two groups of comparative analysis about Snow White and Maleficent. And textual analysis will be used.

### 1.4. Organization of this thesis

The thesis is composed of four chapters. Chapter one is the introduction part, which consists of brief background of the four films, purpose of the study, methodology the study uses and the organization of this thesis. Chapter two is about the literature review, which includes previous studies. Chapter three gives analysis of the four movies. Chapter four introduces the rise of feminism in films and television works. Chapter five is the conclusion part, summarizing the study. Chapter six and seven add some note and limitations about this paper.

## 2. Literature Review

Numerous studies have been conducted on gender representation on television and in cartoons. Feminism theory has been widely applied to study films. Lott (1997) [1] thought that among the most potent messages from mass

media, including films, were that “women (particularly if young and “attractive”) were decorative sex objects, sexually available to men”. Moreover, female roles in some movies are depicted with those traits traditionally considered feminine. Women and girls in children's television programs and cartoons were found to be affectionate, emotional, sensitive and expressive of romantic interests (Busby 1974) [2]. Signorelli (1997) [3] found women were shown whining and crying in movies and on television. Thus, women have an affiliation not only to love and romance, but have also been “closely associated with and scrutinized in terms of their physical appearance” (Milestone and Meyer 2012) [4]. What’s more, Milestone and Meyer also found that what it came down to was that “natural” beauty was proclaimed to be the ideal and what men want. Thus, women were practically told to concur with men’s suspected and presumed wanted and desired. Gender became significant in the study of fairy tales in the 1960s and 1970s with the women’s movement in the United States and Europe of that time (Ragan 2009) [5]. Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz (2003) [6] drawn attention to the frequently unmistakable connection between “beauty” and “goodness” and “ugliness” and “evil” in Grimms’ fairy tales, and that most of the time “beauty” and “goodness” were correlated to younger women. Zipes (2010) [7] claimed that Disney when adapting tales of the Grimm and Perrault collection held fast “to the traditional plots and patriarchal ideology of nineteenth-century folk and fairy tales.” Giroux (1997) [8] found Disney female characters to be subordinate to men. In Disney films when evil was defeated by the “good” party, depending on whether the “instrument of victory” was male or female, while the princess’ strength would be “in her beauty, sensibility, and compassion” (Stephens 2000) [9].

While some scholars have analyzed the evolution of princess in Disney movies. For instance, in 2015, Keisha L. Hoerrner [10] has studied gender roles in Disney films from the aspect of analyzing behaviors from Snow White to Simba. But the female antagonists, also the product of male chauvinism, have been largely ignored. This thesis selects two representative characters, Snow White and Maleficent, and conducts two groups of comparative analysis about the transformation of them at different times and social background, can be an innovation.

### 3. From the Feminist Film Criticism to See the Female Image Model

Feminist narratology mainly focuses on how narrative mode subverts male authority and constructs female authority. Disney animation films have always had their own unique insights into the female characters they portray. Vivid female screen images are still unforgettable. Women are not vases being stared at, but angels holding destiny in their hands, breaking the case of consciousness and fighting against the dark forces. This chapter attempts to discuss the role of “Maleficent” and “Snow White” and find how to subvert the traditional image of man and woman in a fairy tale and establish female authority through a unique female narrative voice, so as to complete the micro-knowledge structure of feminist film theory from the perspective of the model of characters.

#### 3.1. The evolution of the Disney princess

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Disney's first princess animation, came out in 1937, Then in 2012, live-action movie Snow White and the Huntsman was brought to screen. The image of Snow White has changed radically.

In previous animation, young Snow White suffered harsh treatment from her stepmother, also the evil Queen. The Queen feared that someday Snow White’s beauty would surpass her own so she forced her to work as a scullery maid. When Snow White has grown up, her beauty surpassed the Queen, which let the Queen decided to send Huntsman to kill her. The Huntsman let Snow White go, she rushed into dark forest and came to the dwarfs’ house by accident. Dwarfs cleared the whole story then took her in.

The Queen found that Snow White wasn’t dead through the mirror, she changed into an old woman by dark witchcraft, tricked Snow White into eating a poisonous apple. Finally, the Queen fell off the cliff in a flurry. Dwarfs put Snow White in a crystal coffin and she was awakened by the Prince's kiss eventually.

In Snow White and the Huntsman, Snow White's characters have changed a lot. She led the army then was crowned Queen, she has become “the fairest warrior” (Poravee Wornoyorn, Bakk. 2016).

Table 1 below is a detailed comparison of film plots.

**Table 1. The comparison of two versions about character “Snow White”**

|                   | <b>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1937)</b>   | <b>Snow White and the Huntsman (2012)</b>  |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Character setting | “Lips red as the rose, hair black as ebony, skin white as snow.”<br>The most beautiful woman.<br>A lovely princess with innocent and kindest heart who is waiting for prince’s true love. | “As white as snow, lips as red as blood, hair as black as a raven’s wings and all with the strength of that rose.”<br>She is still the most beautiful woman in the world but most of the time in dirty environment and fighting scenes.<br>Pure but not weak, more courageous and independent.<br>The pursuit of love is weakened. |
| Ability           | Housework, cooking, singing   | Fighting, survive in difficulty  |
| Interaction       | Sweet animals: to show Snow White is harmless and welcome.  | Troll: Snow White shouted to a troll for saving huntsman so as to her bravery and particularity.   |

|              |   |  |
|--------------|---|--|
|              | Dwarfs: they sheltered Snow White and protected her from queen's persecution. | Dwarfs: they tied her up when they met, then they fought together sadly one called Gus sacrificed himself.   |
| Prayer       | Prayed for dwarfs' kindness and Prince's true love.                           | Prayed for deliver from evil.  |
| Relationship | Huntsman: unimportant kind killer<br>Prince: true lover<br>Dwarfs: friends    | Huntsman: important comrade, maybe lover<br>Prince: comrade, maybe lover<br>Dwarfs: comrades   |
| Awakening    | Prince  | Huntsman   |
| Ending       | The prince awakened Snow White by a kiss and they lived happily together.     | It was huntsman's kiss of courage that saved Snow White. She charged bodily and defeated the dark army in order to save people from evil queen's government. Finally she became the new leader of her kingdom. |

Based on the details of these plots, we can find that the new version of the live-action movie has overturned many female stereotypes in the original:

- (1) From being a competent wife to pursuing dreams: The animation spends a lot of ink describing Snow White's housework ability which is hardly reflected in the live-action. Instead, it focuses on how Snow White rebuilds the kingdom. In 1937, the most important task for women was to become a good mother and wife and take good care of the family in America society. At that time, the United States continued to be affected by the Great Depression, and the restless people needed such a gentle fairy tale to rekindle the confidence and courage of life (Sarah Wilde 2014). In latter live-action, Snow White, like many modern independent women, can pursue careers and dreams freely.
- (2) From being weak and humble to being brave and tough: This transformation can also be called from attaching to male to being an individual. Snow White in animation will not resist. Facing the hunter's pursuit, she is crying and fleeing; facing the queen's tricks, she eats poisonous apple obediently; at the end of the story, she is lying in the crystal coffin waiting for the prince's redemption and love. She has been brought into a state of blind optimism and negative waiting and all states and difficulties are accomplished with the help of male. In the latter film, Snow White scratches one eye of Queen's brother with an iron nail, counterattacks when the hunter comes to arrest her, she begins to pursue self-worth and releases self-energy.
- (3) From love desire to reasonable pursuing: Snow White in the former film is singing a song called "Someday my prince will come". However, in liv-action, not only the love story is weakened greatly, but also the most interest-

ing thing is the poisonous apple comes from the Queen who is dressed up as the Prince. Although it may be a dramatic plot to show triangular love in the movie, we cannot deny that this shift reflects women's general attitude to love and they begin to escape from family life.

**3.2. The evolution of the Disney female villain**

In Disney's film, villains also appear as significant characters in promoting the development of the plot besides of the positive role. As time goes by, there have appeared many new trends in shaping the villain's image. So this part is about the evolution of the Disney female villain, taking the character "Maleficent" as an example. In animated cartoons which name is "Sleeping Beauty" (1959), Maleficent is an evil who lives in the mountains and has powerful magic. One day she was not invited to participate in the christening of Princess Aurora. In retaliation, she gave the Princess a spell of death: when the girl was 16 year's old, she would be stabbed at a spinning wheel, which means she would never wake up. Since there was also a fairy who had not sent bless to the princess, she enchanted immediately and changes the death spell to a sleeping curse. In this animated version, Maleficent doesn't know love and considerateness. She is just the embodiment of evil, who sends the crow to find the princess all the time, introducing Aurora into the curse step by step and trying her best to prevent the salvation from the prince. But in the live-action film "Maleficent ", which was also published by Disney in 2014, the story has changed a lot. Here we can see many differences of this character in the following Table 2:

**Table 2. The comparison of two versions about character "Maleficent"**

|                   | <b>Sleeping Beauty (1959)</b>  | <b>Maleficent (2014)</b>   |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Character setting | A super evil with powerful magic, who can only do bad things.  | Once Maleficent was a beautiful and pure fairy. She used magic to guard the peace of the elf world and against the invasion from the human beings. After suffering a ruthless betrayal, her heart became cold. She exhibit a variety of both prosocial and antisocial behaviors. |
| Motivation        | Maleficent's curse was simply originated from anger. (She is not invited to participate in the christening of princess Aurora) | The curse began with a man's deception. He pretended to love Maleficent, regained her trust in order to cut off her beautiful wings (which is also acted as her most powerful weapon) so he could be the next king of the human world.   |
| Curse             | Maleficent just said the princess would be stabbed and die, she blocked all the way out.                                       | Maleficent added additional conditions: the princess can be awakened by the kiss of true love instead of sentencing the princess   |

|                            |   |  |
|----------------------------|---|--|
|                            | While other fairy changed the spell, and let the things turned around.  | to death directly, which proved there is still goodwill reminds in her conscious (she still believed in love).   |
| Relationship               | Maleficent always pursued the whereabouts of the princess, and attempted to make the curse come true.                   | Maleficent also played the role of “a fairy godmother” in the process of monitoring the princess. The two established a deep relationship, and the princess even proposed to live with Maleficent forever, which made Maleficent also attempted to eliminate the curse.  |
| After the curse comes true | Maleficent tried her best to prevent the prince from getting the castle. There was a fierce confrontation between them. | The prince was brought into the castle by Maleficent and her crow secretly, because she also looking forward Aurora to wake up.  |
| Ending                     | The prince kissed the princess and the two lived happily together.  | In the end, it is Maleficent’s kiss of maternal love, not that of a random prince, which saved Aurora, and they left the human world, head to the elven’s Kingdom eventually. Furthermore, the princess took over the role of Maleficent and became the queen of the elf world. As for her father, the human king, he died after a grotesque fight sequence. |

Decades of research concerning gender portrayals on television reveal that viewers consistently have been fed a diet of erroneous and demeaning depictions of women (Downs, 1981; Barcus, 1983; Downing, Mohammadi & Sreberny-Mohammadi, 1990), and it is also reflected in the “Sleeping Beauty”, which creates a world filled with gender stereotypes and aggression. In this version, Maleficent is filled with desire and enthusiasm for encroachment. Her unrealistic evil is an extreme of the unrealistic kindness of the princesses, which is a stereotype of a capable woman in the patriarchal culture. Women express their desire for rights and status, that is, evil. In animated version, Maleficent’s magic is so powerful that no one can resist. Even the king has no way to confront her, which made her to be described as a totally bad person who is not recognized by the mainstream society.

While things have changed when it comes to the live-action version. “Maleficent”, which takes its title from the original film's evil antagonist-is a fully feminist retelling of Sleeping Beauty that dispenses utterly with every major sexist element of the original :

- (1) Maleficent portray more stereotypically masculine characteristics. She participated in stereotypically masculine activities, such as conducting diplomacy and war. She is a strong character with problem-solving abilities and actions on a more equal footing with her male peers (the human king).
- (2) This movie is frank in its repudiation of the cult of domesticity nobody takes pleasure in the drudgery of housework or childcare: neither the three incompetent fairies nor the brooding Maleficent, who announces to young Aurora, “I do not like children.”
- (3) In new version, Maleficent is a full person, good and evil, powerful and vulnerable, vengeful and loving regardless of evil forever. The film tends to explore her from a more comprehensive perspective and try to find the root of her behavior. Furthermore, both she and teen-aged Aurora have deeply value heterosexual love, but in the end do not let the idea which established by patriarchal cultures define their personal or public lives.
- (4) In the end, it's women acting in solidarity and love that solves problems, breaks spells, and brings healing

and redemption regardless of man, which makes Maleficent as an example of Disney's contemporary independent female.

Through the transformation of the image of” Maleficent”, the stereotype of female (under the patriarchal society) has been broken. The feminist elements are no longer appear as a simple negative image. The gender role portrayals, measured via the characters’ behavioral characteristics and the resolutions in the film, became more egalitarian over time, which suggests that the more recent Disney Princess movies show a more balanced portrayal of relationship formation. Furthermore, Disney presents its post-feminist character with desires similar to Susan Gill’s description of the myth in society, where women are “entirely autonomous agents, no longer constrained by any inequalities or tyrannies.” (Gill 2007, 93) Disney utilizes this ideology to buoy the narrative conflict, creating a world where heroines are trapped and breakout by herself signifies a happily-ever. For Disney to remake its own classic fairy tale, under its own name, in so radical a fashion represents a major moment in the fairytale film industry, and it also represents the impact of the feminist movement on the film.

In addition, the dramatic conflict between the two works is to describe the different dilemmas the characters are faced with: the dilemma of princess Aurora in Sleeping Beauty is whether she can grasp a chance of life between Sleeping and waking, while the dilemma of Maleficent lies in the competition between good and evil human nature. The former need to obtain the salvation of life by external motivation, while the latter seeks for spiritual sustenance by virtue of her subjective initiative. By setting different story contexts, demonstrating the dramatic conflict in the works, enhancing the conscious will of the person, thus highlighting the identity of the female image, reflecting the deeper collective consciousness and the tragic cultural tragedy that women have in a particular Hollywood background.

#### 4. The Rise of Feminism in Films and Television Works

##### 4.1. Historical developing process

Western feminism is originated from the Enlightenment and the French bourgeois revolution. Under the influence of Enlightenment, women's consciousness began to be awakened and the western feminist movement began to sprout. The development of the Industrial Revolution had greatly enhanced women's social status, especially after the World War II, male labor was dramatically decreased therefore a large amount of women engaged the labor market, thus alerting individual's opinion that women could not undertake essential work which men can handle. Earning salaries, women gained more economic rights which enable them to rethink their social value.

The second wave of feminism took place in the 1960s and 1970s. In that era, economic depression made women aware that only breaking the male-dominated world pattern could avoid making lots of wrong decisions, further solving on the basis of equality between men and women. However, there was still a considerable gap between the desire and the objective reality.

Finally, feminism entered the third stage in the 80~90s of the 20th century. Feminists began gradually attached importance to academic and cultural studies and continued studying the root causes of inequality between men and women. They were interested in cultural equality and cultural identity. Also, there were still many differences between different groups of women that cannot be eradicated, so feminists continued cultivating the patriarchal culture, trying to construct a system of multiple female discourses that emphasized differences. That is to say, women's individualized differences to get attention.

#### 4.2. Movies and feminism

This change is also clearly reflected in the Disney film. Snow White did not put hope on prince any more. She used a sharp sword to kill evil creatures, and held shield for self-protect, rather than sought help from seven dwarfs. In Disney cartoon, Snow White begged for meeting prince, while never thought about relying on herself, reflecting social environment that disbelieve women could decide their own destiny, as a result of Patriarchies was rooted in that era. Another example is that, compared with the Disney cartoon Sleeping Beauty and the modern live-action movie Maleficent, the main character Maleficent gave maternal care to Aurora. In contrast to the wicked witch whose aim is to make Aurora sleep forever.

From the media, we can clearly find that, once people believed that wicked people are mostly women, which extremely unfair for a certain gender. However, with development of the feminism, this consciousness has been lightened. Seeming like wicked female personality can also have a noble side. In a nutshell, media is a reflection about a world's cultural development. Women stand up in the movie means that women nowadays undertake crucial social affairs as well. Many women presi-

dents and women entrepreneurs enjoy reputation and fame all over the world. Women deal with their daily work more carefully, enabling them to have more chance to get a job promotion, thus changing the whole society's attitude for women's ability. There is no doubt that: the gap between sex has narrowed.

From the theory, we can know that the criticism of feminist film directly points to the negative aspects of commercial film, pointing out not only the oppression and discrimination against women in Hollywood film. Commercial industry in the 20th century is mostly established by male, so the capitalists prefer women to stay at home, and taking care of all the family members. Therefore, in last century's commercial film, women seldom had dazzling achievements, even becoming male's accessory. To some extent, feminist criticism of Disney animation film has a distinct social criticism significance. The reason why women characters display in a different way is the most and more advanced feminist concepts.

#### 4.3. Influencing factors about feminism

First and the foremost. In the past decades, the commodity economy developing rapidly, more job vacancy was provided for women. And then they realized that only achieving women and men are equal could save them from workplace discrimination. It is a common phenomenon that women are much harder to find a decent job than the other gender, and sometimes when women and men successfully be hired for the same job. Women earn less wages. Workplace discrimination intensifies social contradictions and women found that their legitimate interests have not been concerned enough by the society. Through the Labor Union's demonstration, government established some related laws to prevent job discrimination, as a consequence women becoming the mainstay power in the workplace. When they grow up to be an important source of income in a certain family, they deservedly be respected by their husbands. They would not be afraid of divorce and abandoned, so they have more discourse of power in family affairs, some of them refused to alert their last name to their husbands'. Housework gradually jointly undertaken by the husband and wife. Women are more independent which marks that the feminism has a further development.

What's more, from a political perspective, Feminist movements made women focus on raising the attention of all sectors of society on women's rights and interests. Also more women protection mechanism is established. The number of women being affected by domestic violence is obviously decreasing. With male's mistakes in political decision-making, such as the Watergate incident, Berlin Wall event, and cold war etc. Meanwhile, many outstanding women politicians have appeared in the world. The most outstanding representative is the Lady Thatcher of England, the world's first female prime mi-

nister. She gets another name: Iron Maiden. Dollar currency system's crash made the whole British whole stuck in a financial crisis. In that situation, she used tough politic means, which led the UK out of economic difficulties and improved the international status of the whole country. Although many patriarchs accused Thatcher is ruthless and does not care about the hardships of laid-off workers, even on the Hong Kong issue, she completely lost to Chinese chairman Deng Xiaoping, which patriarchs believed that she could not even conquer a short man. Anyway, without her, the British economy could not recover so quickly, even today British people cannot forget her contributions toward the United Kingdom. Mrs. Thatcher is a typical feminist, and her political achievements have also allowed women to stand up in political stages.

Last but not the least, Politics and economy react to culture, so the feminist culture is widely spread. Feminist literary work gained more popularity. Media is a carrier which incorporating many feminist cultural elements. In the 21th century's film, women gradually become more responsible, even capability for controlling the development of the whole setting in film and television work. Women alert to symbolic of kindness, brave and sincere. Evil characters are more played by male. Another essential reason why movie corporate change in the shaping of female characters is that women are gradually enriching their cultural life. In particular, watching movie or TV shows and the concerts. So if movie work contains any male chauvinism elements, the vast majority of feminist viewers will refuse to pay for it. In order to cater to the cultural needs of female audiences, thereby further improving the movie box office, film companies must produce the perfect female image, which encourages the fighting spirit of the Female Audience.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the study of four films in different periods, our group found that the portrayal of princess and female villain both has changed in the 21st century. Women do not only symbolize yield and weakness, but show a stronger image in front of the audiences. The transformation of Disney's feminine characters is a reflection of the development of feminism and an improvement of women's status.

## 6. Note

When it comes to the future development of the feminism, our group believed that Feminist culture will focus on diversity. For example: the interests of the lesbian community will be better protected. In other words, the connotation of feminism will be more integrated into the protection of minority groups. Only by comprehensively safeguarding the rights and interests of various groups of women can we better promote the development of femin-

ism and encourage more women to express views. For instance, some time ago China's "ME TOO" event has been controversial from all walks of life. Women suffer from sexual harassment for quite a long time, while governments have not paid enough attention to this issue so that many criminals feel that they have opportunities to bully women. All in all, we appeal governments could crack down on crimes against women's rights and interests. Feminism still needs further development. Although feminism has been widely accepted in developed countries, many third world countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, women are still Persecuted by male chauvinism, so the international women's rights protection agencies should pay more attention to the feminism publicity of these countries, and report timely about the those country's Patriarchal atrocities through the influential media. Only in this way could be women's protection organizations put pressure on the patriarchal countries' governments and force them to change.

## 7. Limitations

This study only examined the Disney Princess movie line specifically, which does not represent all Disney movies. It also only included analysis of the princess and prince characters and did not consider the gendered attributes of any other characters, of which there were many. It also could not incorporate subtleties like animation techniques that may have enhanced the gender message. Otherwise, this research taking the film theory as the framework, assisting the theoretical reference of communication, paying less attention to sociology and psychology.

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