

## Disney Values

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One of my favorite obsessions as a teen was observing how people behave while making hypothetical assumptions about their own childhoods and who or what guided them to adulthood. In recent years, I've turned this acutely assumed observation around. I've taken a step back from myself and tried to figure out a variety of my quirks and where they may have originated based on my childhood.

I can say from experience that I didn't have a particularly creepy neighbor that made men seem intimidating at a fragile time in my life. I didn't have a friend or friends growing up who would be considered a bad influence in terms of drugs or alcohol. Or, a strange family that produced an even stranger upbringing that would make me depressed about life and the motivation of most human beings—so who or what do I blame for how I turned out? The answer here is quite simple: Disney's subtly twisted films.

We've all heard the tales of a dirty word scrawled in a cloud of dust from The Lion King<sup>1</sup>, or the phallic art on the cover of The Little Mermaid<sup>2</sup>. What I see more often throughout Disney films are the best skewed messages for our youngsters right out in the open. A keen observer may notice subliminal themes in many of the songs or presentations of most Disney movies that range from illicit drug use, negative social stereotypes, or depressing themes that make life seem not quite so pretty.

A good place to start would be the 1940's cartoon Pinocchio, which gives us our first exposure to illegal underage behavior in the Disney Kingdom. The astonishing message during one key plot

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<sup>1</sup>During the moments when Simba is going off on his own to find himself in The Lion King (1994), the dust cloud is believed to form the letters "S-E-X" before they drift away in the wind. In my experience it has never appeared without some slow-motion capture or careful pauses, and I have been thus far able to continue enjoying the film without any subliminal side-effects.

<sup>2</sup>On the cover of the first print VHS version of The Little Mermaid (1989), one of the pillars on the underwater castle in the background is thought to have been purposely shaped like a penis. Even looking at the "proof," I have a hard time believing it was done on purpose. Besides, how many people were looking at the background images in a film like that? Isn't there a half-naked fish-woman front and center in that entire film?

point in Pinocchio shows us that alcohol and cigars turn you into an ass. No, really, the little wooden puppet Pinocchio is very literally turned into a donkey while smoking and drinking at a bar—which is basically true in real life except for the physical transformation. That can only be achieved by artistic manipulation, or our next subject.

Dumbo (1941) features one massive alcohol trip including psychedelic “Pink Elephants on parade.” The baby elephant with too-big-ears finds his way into barrels of beer/wine that the circus clowns were drinking in celebration of Dumbo's newfound ability to fly around the Big Top. After the elephant and his mouse partner pass out from the alcohol, Dumbo dreams up pink elephants that are formed by his drunken trunk-bubbles floating through the air. The pink hallucinations also happen to have one of the creepiest theme songs ever created.

After plain old cigars and alcohol, we visit the land of the hardcore influences with Alice in Wonderland (1951). This classic tale features a moment where the talking creature that Alice encounters in Wonderland is a pompous caterpillar smoking opium, masterfully spelling out questions<sup>3</sup> with puffs of smoke. This bad influence of a butterfly larva suggests—no, he boisterously demands that young Alice should eat opposite sides of a mushroom to grow or shrink in size. That would be unprocessed Heroin to smoke and magic 'shrooms, for those keeping track.

Disney also instills some strange ideas about society through its recurring themes. An example here is the general idea that anyone who happens to be ugly is also evil. This theme is visited many times in Disney since the early days of Snow White (1937) with the angry and vain Snow Witch playing the part of the neglected, warty, old beggar woman. Or, your Prince Charming in many cases will not have a truly distinguished appearance—he is often portrayed as a tall man with dark hair and

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<sup>3</sup>*Questions the caterpillar asks such as “Oo R U?” and “Y?” are spelled in the air long before text messaging and e-mail had had a chance to shorten our words to mere letters. Eerie coincidence or an open window to the future?*

light eyes. Even the love interest in the aforementioned Snow White is simply named “Prince.”<sup>4</sup>

That makes a nice transition to sex as viewed by our society, happily emphasized by Disney's many male characters. For instance, Lumière of Beauty and the Beast (1991) was kind of a dirty—uh, candelabra—in his own animated way. When he's supposed to be guarding Belle's door to make sure she doesn't sneak out or do anything funny, he's caught away from his post—violently exploring second base with the French-maid-style feather duster, Babette, in spite of her many cries of “Oh, no!” followed by his defiant humming “Oh, yes,” in response.

On the subject of acceptable promiscuity, the young male lead dog of Lady and the Tramp (1955) has his own man-whore theme song called “He's a Tramp,” which is sorrowfully sung by all of the poor heartbroken lady-dogs of the pound—oh, and his name is “Tramp.” This gives kids the idea that guys can do whatever they like without restraint, and gals just get names like “Lady” and “Belle” since 1955.

To give people a nice warm-and-fuzzy feeling about life starting at an early age, The Lion King (1994) starts off with the song “The Circle of Life,” which sounds cheery enough until you listen to the lyrics. At one point the lines go a little something like this:

*"More to see than can ever be seen,  
more to do than can ever be done."*

Basically, the song states that you're not going to have the opportunity to do everything you want, or see everything you want. You'll die first. In the same film, the song "Be Prepared" is an actual murder plot, set to hauntingly fun music. It's pleasantly rounded off by a humorous hyena chorus (voiced by Cheech Marin, Whoopie Goldberg, and Jim Cummings).

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<sup>4</sup>The most common repeat themes in Disney films have been the notion of Prince Charming and the ugly enemy. The “enemy” is almost always either obviously disfigured (*Scar*; The Lion King), generically ugly (*The Stepsisters*, Cinderella), or a transforming dragon sorceress named Maleficent (Sleeping Beauty). On the other end of the spectrum, Prince Charming seems to have been started in the age of Snow White with the love interest simply named “Prince” according to IMDB. New Wave song writer who loves the color purple, or stereotype for the many following Disney ages? You decide.

Back to Beauty and the Beast; there is also a melodically depraved propaganda song,<sup>5</sup> “The Mob Song,” which is tactfully used to rile up a bloodthirsty mob. Freshly heartbroken pretty-boy Gaston is brainwashing the village to be afraid of something he has no idea about (or is jealous of, after Disney Beauty Belle rejected him for a Beast). Giving us yet another family friendly Disney murder plot:

*"Say a prayer, then we're there/  
At the drawbridge of a castle/  
And there's something truly terrible inside/  
It's a beast! He's got fangs/  
Razor sharp ones!/  
Massive paws, killer claws for the feast/  
Hear him roar! See him foam!/  
But we're not coming home 'til he's dead--/  
Good and dead!/  
Kill the Beast!"*

Do I even need to add anything about Bambi<sup>6</sup>(1942)? Even the mellow rain song about “April Showers” brings on the somber feeling of depression. Really, no one should have positive, happy memories of Bambi. I was also going to add Mary Poppins<sup>7</sup> (1964), but that entire film would have made the drug-reference list, and probably some cheerfully almost-acceptable lessons in profane vanity

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<sup>5</sup> *Jealousy is a theme that runs deep in Disney as well. Whether it comes from humiliated hunk Gaston from Beauty and the Beast, or the witch who poisons Snow White because the Mirror, Mirror on the Wall doesn't compliment meanies. Or, Lady Tremaine in Cinderella, who simply wreaks of jealousy in her every action.*

<sup>6</sup> *Bambi (1942) was originally written by Felix Salten as a very tragic tale of a baby deer and his family during hunting season, some forest fires, and other depressing events. The Disney version is the same thing, only emphasizing the cutesy animal aspect in an attempt to fluff it up with a skunk named “Flower.”*

<sup>7</sup> *Mary Poppins (1964) is the very lengthy live-action Disney film adaptation of the P.L. Travers children's book of the same name. The story has mysterious nanny Mary Poppins feeding the children color-changing medicine, singing nonsense songs, and bringing statues to life after feeding creepy pigeons in the park, and is simply oozing vanity because she's “practically perfect in every way.”*

in society as well.

Going the road of religious treachery, the bad guy *cat* in Cinderella (1950) is bluntly named Lucifer of Biblical infamy. This feline lives up to that name by sabotaging Cinderella's Prince Charming plans, attacking the friendly singing mice, and just being generally a not-nice cat. I guess it is sort-of okay in context as the friendly mice mostly pronounce the cat's name something like "Ruthify" in the film, which doesn't sound nearly as threatening. If that's not inciting some form of outrage, though, you could spend an afternoon hunting down a pack of 101 newborn *puppies* for fur coats in 101 Dalmatians (1961).

Finally, one of my personal favorites from a feminist perspective would have to be the song "Poor Unfortunate Souls" from The Little Mermaid (1989). The evil sea witch Ursula spins a tale of how women should behave in order to convince the young mermaid Ariel to give up her voice in exchange for legs to be a human. It goes a little something like this:

*"The men up there don't like a lot of blabber/*

*They think a girl who gossips is a bore<sup>8</sup>!/*

*Yet on land it's much preferred for ladies not to say a word/*

*And after all dear, what is idle babble for?/*

*Come on, they're not all that impressed with conversation/*

*True gentlemen avoid it when they can/*

*But they dote and swoon and fawn/*

*On a lady who's withdrawn/*

*It's she who holds her tongue who gets a man..."*

I think the purple octopus woman is trying to tell us that women should be seen, not heard. Big talk

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<sup>8</sup> I always hear "whore" instead of "bore" while listening to this song. I would imagine if The Little Mermaid were Rated "PG-13" or "R" that would probably be the actual lyric.

coming from the humanoid octopus version of the drag queen Divine<sup>9</sup>.

And some years later, after massive doses of magic, Prozac, and champagne, they all lived happily ever after. The end.

**Disclaimer:**

Most if not all of the themes presented here are really beyond the general comprehension of most children, regardless of their intelligence or ability to grasp the real world. Honestly, the only part of Cinderella<sup>10</sup> I remember from my own childhood was the King jumping on the bed with a sword. I recall thinking to myself, “He shouldn't be jumping on the bed,” paying no mind to the sharpened weapon or his raging temper. I feel much of my upbringing and that of many generations before and after mine have been influenced by Disney, but maybe not quite this much of it in such a negative light. Besides, we didn't turn out so badly, did we?

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<sup>9</sup> *The drag queen Divine, aka Harris Glenn Milstead (probably most widely known for his/her role in the 1988 film “Hairspray” as Edna Turnblad, was inspiration for the sea-witch Ursula's image according to the film's director, John Musker, as he mentions in the DVD's special features. This may seem odd to you, until you see an image of deceased drag queen Divine anywhere near an image of Ursula.*

<sup>10</sup> *Cinderella (1950) is a girl's dream come true for centuries. Starting off life as a poor yet beautiful servant, verbally abused by your evil stepmother and cruel stepsisters, left to sleep in the cinders of the fireplace, destined to be turned into a queen when her expressionless Prince Charming appears with a glass slipper or other trinket. Originally written by Charles Perrault and translated by Disney, other versions exist, such as Pretty Woman, Ever After, and other alternate Cinderella-style stories.*