

ONCE UPON A FAIRYTALE ROMANCE

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	1
ABSTRACT.....	2
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION TO THESIS	
Media and Disney Information.....	3
Figure A.....	12
Figure B.....	13
II. ANALYSIS OF FIVE DISNEY MOVIES	
Happily Ever After.....	14
Love at First Sight.....	16
True Love's Kiss.....	19
Indication Symbols.....	20
Marrying Up.....	23
Opposites Attract.....	24
III. CONCLUSION	



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## Abstract

This thesis analyzes five Disney films to assess whether they contain romantic notions that perpetuate unrealistic romantic expectations in American women. The Walt Disney Company has a powerful media presence and is responsible for some of the most popular and lucrative films. Beginning with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, several of Disney's animated films introduce specific and original romantic motifs that are contained within story lines. Because of the widespread popularity of Disney films, the effects of the romantic ideas found in many of these films merit their study. To that end, the following five animated Disney films were subjected to critical analysis: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Mulan*. Through this analysis, key romantic elements such as "love at first sight" and "true love's kiss" were discovered to be common and recurrent themes. Furthermore, a theory is proposed these romantic elements in Disney films contribute to establishing and raising unrealistic expectations. Finally, the study contrasts fictitious movies with statistics, studies, and psychological theories that reflect real world realities on romance.

## Introduction

The media are increasingly prevalent and influential in modern American culture. As an entity, the media comprises radio, television, magazines, books, newspapers, and movies. Six powerful companies monopolize the majority of the media in America. General Electric, The News Corporation and Time Warner dominate the communications industry as do Viacom, CBS and the Walt Disney Company (Free Press, n.d.). Well-known for its memorable animated programs and captivating movies, the Walt Disney Company holds significant prominence amongst the media and public audiences.

Exerting its influence through countless diverse media outlets, the Walt Disney Company owns numerous entertainment facets. In fact, Disney owns the “ABC Television Network; cable networks including ESPN, the Disney Channel, SOAPnet, A&E and Lifetime; 277 radio stations, music and book publishing companies; production companies Touchstone, Miramax, and Walt Disney Pictures; Pixar Animation Studios; the cellular service Disney Mobile, and theme parks around the world” (Free Press, n.d.).

Ultimately, Disney is perhaps best known for its family films that particularly appeal to children. Many of the top grossing films have been Disney productions, including *Finding Nemo*, *The Lion King*, *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, *The Incredibles*, *Monsters, Inc.*, *Toy Story 2*, *Aladdin*, *Toy Story*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and *Tarzan*. “The top 10 money making Disney movies of all time includes [sic] some of the greatest animated films ever made” (“Top Ten,” 2004). An additional list displays the impressive earnings of Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, and *Mulan* (Box Office Mojo, 2011). These lists

signify that a vast number of Americans viewing Disney's romantic films targeted at children.

In contrast to Disney's film success, not all produce movies that contain the components necessary to generate massive revenue. According to Davis (2006), "If a film is to make money, it must appeal to a mass audience. . .it must contain ideas, themes, characters, stories, and perceptions to which it can relate. It must . . .be relevant to the audience's world view if it is to be successful" (p. 17). Yet, intriguingly, the Cultivation Theory suggests that movies actually shape audiences' worldview instead of vice versa (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011). Cultivation analysis was developed by George Gerbner and his colleagues. This theory ". . . explores the extent to which television viewers' beliefs about the 'real world' are shaped by heavy exposure to the most stable, repetitive, and pervasive patterns that television presents, especially in its dramatic entertainment programs" (Morgan, n.d.). Disney's ability to craft stories that readily appeal to a young audience is largely responsible for its influential role in the media.

Simultaneously, clever marketing strategies sustains Disney's influence and success. For example, in 2001, Disney created the Princess line with an advertising and marketing campaign specifically targeted toward young girls. The original line included more than 25,000 marketable products that tied into eight of Disney's animated films (England, et al., 2011, p.555). The line was subsequently expanded to include product tie-ins from two animated Disney movies newer movies, which further increased the targeted audience. The Disney movies currently represented in the Princess line include *Snow White and The Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty*



*and the Beast, Aladdin, Pocahontas, Mulan, Tangled, and The Frog Princess.* Each of the films featured in the Princess line includes a heroine who meets and falls in love with her hero who represents her “happily ever after” status. Disney films often follow a traditional interpretation of love and marriage (Davis, 2006) That is, heroes and heroines meet, fall in love, endure separation and hardship that test their devotion and pureness of heart, reunite, marry, and live “happily ever after.” The audience is led to believe that the “happily ever after” status of the characters is an unchanging continuation of their end-of-the-movie state of love and happiness.

“There is nothing in most films, Disney or other, to indicate that love, even when it lasts, can change, or lose its intensity without losing its strength” (Davis, 2006, p. 21). Some modern writers believe that the tendency to focus on the “happily ever after” status is part of the problem in marital instability in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Reibstein (as cited in Davis, 2006, p. 21) says “because romantic tales usually end at the wedding (whole years eclipsed by the lying words; ‘and they lived happily ever after’) and because there has been scant attention paid to the question of how to live together in the increasingly complex state of marriage or long-term cohabitation, most people are naïve about what it entails.” Further, Kniffen (n.d.) states most romantic movies rush through various stages of dating. Within an hour and a half, the main characters have fallen in love and solved all their problems, where real relationships are constantly evolving, growing, and enduring hardships (Kniffen, n.d.).

Based on personal observation, I have noted that the “Princess” movies have interwoven romantic elements as well. Five examples of animated Disney movies containing romantic elements are *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, The*

*Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Mulan*. This analysis specifically focuses on these five films because of their long-standing availability to the public, continuous marketing and sales, romantic notions of “true love’s kiss” and “love at first sight.” The sheer popularity of these films and their influence on the romantic expectations for American women merits further analysis.

Disney’s version of *Snow White and The Seven Dwarves* premiered in 1937. Wright (1997) says it immediately contributed to the history of film. “Disney’s implementation of love at first sight in the film was entirely American, replacing the medieval European idea of coupling strangers” (Wright, 1997). Another original Disney motif is Snow White’s awakening only by true love’s kiss. According to Wright (1997), the kiss is evidence that Disney created these movies for adults as well as children. The kiss is presented by a stranger unwed to Snow White, which embraces the Western idea of romantic involvement before commitment. Finally, the romantic concept of this couple living “happily ever after” as the film concludes is first appearance of a romantic motif that recurs in most Disney films.

The Walt Disney Company’s *Cinderella* premiered on February 15, 1950. This animated film is regarded as another Disney classic. In many ways, *Cinderella* shares common themes with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* owing similar plot elements involving a horrid stepmother, friendly animals, and the damsel’s escape from her plight through marriage to a prince. *Cinderella* tells the story of a young woman who lives in poverty and is treated as a slave in her own home. Eventually, she finds her prince, falls in love, and marries him. The film’s romantic elements observed include like love at first

sight, symbolism, i.e. the glass slipper, to indicate that Cinderella is indeed the best mate choice for the prince, and riding away to live “happily ever after.”

*The Little Mermaid* was first released in 1989. Unequivocally, this movie was the first commercially successful film since Mr. Walt Disney’s death in 1966. The movie also reaffirmed the Walt Disney Company’s position as “the largest producers of ‘acceptable’ role models for young girls” (Sells, 1995, p. 176). Once again, the notion of love at first sight is depicted when Princess Ariel sees Prince Eric. In fact, Ariel defiantly informs her father “Daddy, I love him” after only seeing Eric on one occasion. Ariel’s singing voice is the symbol used to indicate to Eric that Ariel is his true love. Initially, Eric lacks the self-confidence to acknowledge Ariel is the one for him. Then, he hears her melodic voice. Somehow, through a twist of events, Ariel sacrificially allows herself to be transformed into a human and encourages Prince Eric to fall in love with her just as the sun is setting on the third day. This implies that if women alter themselves for men, they will find true love. At the end of the film, they marry and again live “happily ever after.”

*Beauty and the Beast* was launched in 1991. Interestingly, the story script was written by Linda Woolverton, the first female to write a script for an animated Disney film (Henke & Umble, 1999). In this film, the treatment of love is different from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, and *The Little Mermaid*. Love is not translated as something that happens at first sight. Instead, love is defined in three different ways. The character Gaston defines love by physical appearance when he describes Belle. “Belle, by her actions, defines love not by physical appearance, but by sacrifice,” a contrasting view (Henke & Umble, 1999, p. 327). Moreover, Mrs. Potts alludes to love as

something that involves struggle, discovery, and compromise in the song “Beauty and the Beast” (Henke & Umble, 1999). These last two descriptions of love may seem healthy, none the less, there is one significant problematic idea that is communicated in the film—a beast can be changed into a prince by the love of a woman. This communicates to viewers that a woman can change a man or that a man will change his behavior for a woman. Throughout the movie, Beast becomes a better creature and eventually a better man because of his growing affection and eventual love for Belle. In the film, her love for him ultimately saves him. This time, the indication symbol is a rose. In the movie, if Belle can break the spell before the last petal falls, overcoming the “thorns,” she is the suitable one for Beast. At the end of the movie, as always, they marry and live “happily ever after.”

*Mulan* was released in 1998. By that time, women were more involved in the movie making process. According to Davis (2006), “Stronger, tougher women had begun to appear, both within Disney films and in the large arena of the Hollywood cinema” (p.194). This movie embraces women’s individuality and negatively portrays match-making schemes. In the end, Mulan restores honor to her family and finds love by being her unique self. However, Shang, Mulan’s previous commanding officer, is not aware that Mulan is actually a woman for the majority of the movie. He becomes attracted to her after he discovers she is, in fact, a woman. In real life, the likelihood of romance arising from gender deception is not probable. However, like in most Disney films, both of these characters overcome hardships, with love winning in the end, and the typical “happily ever after” motif is implied.

Disney weaves a multitude of other romantic elements into different Disney films, but the focus for this analysis remains on the five Disney animations previously mentioned. They will be explored in an effort to better understand the reality or altered-reality of the romantic messages within Disney fantasy films. One possible reason for the frequency of romantic elements in Disney films is because Walt Disney viewed his audience in terms of male versus female rather than adult versus child. Essentially, Walt Disney recognized his audience was primarily female (Davis, 2006). Davis (2006) says this analysis is evidenced by Walt Disney's comments in reference to a dream sequence idea for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. According to Allan (As cited in Davis, 2006, p.110), Walt Disney stated, "I feel this sequence would be for the women. After all 80 percent of our audiences are women. . . ."

Perhaps, the fact that these movies portray unrealistic ideals such as love at first sight or "happily ever after" should not matter. After all, some believe these types of romantic movies are harmless. However, others disagree and say harmful myths about romance have been spun by the media and put into glamorized form. Kniffen (2007, para. 4) states "Popular Culture has done a great disservice in its perpetuation of unrealistic expectations with regards to love and relationships." Television, movies, and books often model unachievable states in love and relationships. Peoples' emotional side and intellectual side are in constant disagreement. Intellectually, women recognize the myths they see in the media, especially movies, are false. However, their emotional side still craves the images that have been fed to them through the media, including advertising and movies. This is because images of unrealistic love have barraged their psyches for years (Kniffen, 2007, para.4).

Unrealistic romantic plot lines pervade the film industry. “In the celluloid world of romantic comedies, shy but decent men get the girl, arguments set up sweet reconciliations, and couples separated by tragedy are always reunited through improbable coincidence” (Harrell, 2008, para.1). Additionally, researchers at Heriot Watt University’s Family and Personal Relationships Laboratory in Edinburgh completed a study of 40 Hollywood romantic comedies released between 1995-2005. As part of their research, Dr. Holme’s team had approximately 130 student volunteers watch the 2001 romantic comedy *Serendipity*, while another group watched a David Lynch drama. The research team discovered viewers of the romantic comedy were found to be more likely to believe in fate and destiny. “It does give us some indication of [the effects of romantic comedies],” argues Holmes (as cited in Harrell, 2008, para.4). Evidently, researchers are curious about the possible effects that unrealistic expectations have on the viewers.

Not only can unrealistic expectations created by the media affect relationships, the media affect the most serious type of relationship—marriage. Segrin and Nabi (2002) explored this idea as they conducted a survey that involved 285 never-married university students. The goal of the survey was to examine the relationship between television viewing, holding idealistic expectations about marriage, and intentions to marry. Viewing of romantic genre programming (e.g. romantic comedies, soap operas) was positively associated with idealistic expectations about marriage, and strong and positive association between these expectations and marital intentions was evidenced. Segrin and Nabi (2002) state that “Numerous authors have pointed to mass media influences as a significant source of romanticized and idealized views of marriage” (Segrin & Nabi,

2002). In addition to researchers, comedians are interested in the unrealistic expectations and advice that comes from romantic comedies as well.

A number of websites poke fun at the unrealistic romantic elements found in Disney films. The following two pictures were selected from the website [www.cracked.com](http://www.cracked.com). This website is known for its humorous creations. The figures, created by Dan O'Brien and Matt Barrs, are imitating the first two pages of the popular magazine *Cosmopolitan*. Figure A highlights several of the unrealistic romantic elements found in popular animated Disney films such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and several more. Figure B elaborates on more of the elements. The two figures appear to illustrate the false advice that is communicated through many animated Disney films. "Disney has been entertaining children for years with stories centered around personal tragedies and some rather strange ideas about courtship and marriage" ("Classic Disney Movies," n.d., para. 1).

Figure A.





Figure B.

## Dating Advice from Disney Princesses

**22 Bon Voyage!**  
Don't be afraid to abandon your friends, family and entire way of life on the first date, even if future hubby's love is largely predicated strictly on your singing voice!



**23**  
The cold, terrifying beast (literally!) who holds your father prisoner is just the **Prince** you haven't met yet!



**24**  
"He's only lying about who he is because he thinks you're shallow and superficial.  
**LOVE HIM FOR IT."**



**25**  
**DRESS TO IMPRESS!**  
Princes like women in painful, elaborate and expensive evening wear. This is the man of your dreams, probably.  
Don't get cheap!



**26**  
**THERE IS NOTHING WEIRD**  
about kissing girls while they're unconscious.



CRACKED.com

### Analysis of the Selected Movies

Through provocative thought, repetitive viewing, extensive note taking, and profuse research, I conducted thorough analysis of each of the five Disney movies: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Mulan*. The equation  $X \rightarrow Y \neq Z$  is a shorthand notation I developed to illustrate the inaccurate representations of romance in the above mentioned movies. The notation implies that Y is the product of X which does not equal Z. The factor X represents romantic elements, Y represents unrealistic expectations, and Z represents reality. The notation can be translated into the following words: romantic elements cause unrealistic expectations, which do not represent reality. I define romantic elements as elements that encourage a romantic bond between two people and unrealistic relationship expectations or URE as unrealistic ideals that do not fit the norm. Reality is defined as romantic actions, words, and behaviors that occur in the real world.

### Happily Ever After

“Happily ever after” or HEA is one of the key elements I observed in *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty & the Beast*, and *Mulan*. This romantic ingredient is always seen at the end of these Disney films. “Happily ever after” is either implied or written out in letters on the screen. I define this concept as an ambiguous explanation that leads the observer to believe the characters lived in happy relationship bliss for the remainder of their lives. All the movies ended at the happy peak of the story when all conflicts had been resolved. The URE that can arise from the romantic element HEA is serious relationships such as marriages are easy; once the right two people find each other, their relationship will be filled with harmony. In *Snow White and the Seven*

*Dwarves*, Prince Charming and Snow White literally ride off into the sun set. Then, the end page within a story book is shown on the screen, and the words read “and they lived happily ever after.” However, audiences were not shown any marital relationship struggles the characters might endure nor how they resolve those struggles. The observer is instead led to believe that the two characters lived in a deliriously happy and content state for the remainder of their married lives.

In the movie *Cinderella*, a similar situation occurs at the end of the fairytale. After they are married, Cinderella and her Prince Charming ride in a carriage. The screen goes dark. Then, the words, “and they lived happily ever after” are also shown on the last page of a book. The viewer is only left to assume that they will live a life void of any marital problems. An implied “happily ever after” is also shown at the end of *The Little Mermaid*. After Ariel waves goodbye to her father, she and Prince Eric share one last passionate kiss as the screen fades. The words “happily ever after” are not written on the screen, but the ending with a perfect kiss conveys to the audience that Ariel and her prince will spend the rest of their lives enjoying each other’s company within marriage. *Beauty and the Beast* follows suite by also using an implied “happily ever after” in the end. As Beauty and the Beast (who has now transformed into a man) twirl around the ballroom, they lovingly stare into each other’s eyes. Then the scene shows a stained glass picture of Beauty and her Prince gazing at each other before the screen fades to black and the end credits roll. Of the five movies, *Mulan* has the most subtly implied “happily ever after.” Mulan invites Shang to join her family for dinner. The expanse of the garden then materializes, and the movie ends. Still, the observer is led to believe they will form a relationship and eventually marry.

In reality, all marriages do not end in Happily Ever After. “Among adults who have been married. . . one-third (33%) have experienced at least one divorce. That means that among all Americans 18 years of age or older, whether they have been married or not, 25% have gone through a marital split” (barna.org). In fact, there are 3.6 divorces for every 1,000 households. This divorce rate is low compared to past years. However, that does not signify that people are having less marital problems. There are different reasons that can help explain why the divorce rate may be lower recently than in past years. The first is that many couples live together these days. “Since 1970, the number of unmarried couples who are living together has increased tenfold” (totaldivorce.com). If their relationship ends, it is not recorded by the Census Bureau. Additionally, people are waiting longer to marry by as much as five years than in the past. Also, legislators have been attempting to lower divorce rates by such techniques as “. . . extending the divorce waiting period, proposing covenant marriages, requiring pre-marital and divorce education classes. . . many legislators have been under the impression that divorce is threatening the sanctity of marriage unlike ever before” (totaldivorce.com). Marriage is rewarding, challenging, and certainly not as effortless as the “happily ever after” ending Disney movies portray.

### Love at First Sight

Another common romantic element I analyzed, used in three of the five movies, was “love at first sight.” This can be defined as characters seeing each other and then instantly developing deep feelings and knowing they are meant to spend the remainder of their lives together. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Cinderella*, deep feelings are expressed by one character toward another character after

only one or a few meetings. It appears these Disney characters are conveying true love can happen quickly or even instantly. At the beginning of the movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, Snow White sings, “I’m wishing for the one I love to find me today.” The prince then enters the scene immediately. As he gazes at her, he begins singing, “One song I have been singing of one love only for you.” Snow White seems to reciprocate his affections, and the movie depicts their instant love after only that one very brief meeting.

In *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel notices Prince Eric on his ship and is smitten by his handsome features. A few minutes later, a storm breaks out, and Ariel saves Prince Eric’s life by dragging him to the shore where she then sings to him. In the movie, the next day Ariel is shown swimming about the underwater castle in a daze, and her sisters announce to their father that Ariel is in love. In another example, the character, Prince Eric, illustrates the concept “love at first sight” when he proclaims his opinions on love only a few minutes before a tremendous storm appears. During this time, Prince Eric’s loyal advisor Grim reminds Prince Eric that he has not yet found the right girl. Prince Eric replies, “Believe me Grim, when I find her, I’ll know, without a doubt. Bam, it will just hit me like lightning.”

With the film *Cinderella*, the main characters, Prince Charming and Cinderella, instantaneously fall in love right away as well. In fact, the moment Cinderella enters the main area of the palace, the Prince peers upward and immediately invites her to dance. And, in case the audience failed to recognize the significance of this action, the song “So this is Love” begins to play with lyrics such as “So this is love, Mmmmmm. So this is love. So this is what makes life divine.”

In reality, this “love at first sight” should be named “lust at first sight.” The characters in each of the Disney movies cited are physically attractive, so it is plausible these characters would be attracted to one another. In real-life, individuals do prefer those whom they find physically attractive over those whom they do not find physically attractive (Hendrick & Hendrick as cited in Hyde and Delamater, 2011). However, to call or imply that this physical attraction is love is an overstatement. Robert Sternberg developed the triangular theory of love that introduces the idea that there are three components to love—intimacy, decision or commitment, and passion. Intimacy is the emotional component, passion is the motivational component, and decision or commitment is the cognitive component. Intimacy is deeper feelings and includes factors such as mutual understanding, sharing one’s self, close communication, and giving and receiving emotional support (Sternberg as cited in Hyde and Delamater, 2011). “Love at first sight,” certainly lacks intimacy. Decision or commitment concerns short-term and long-term aspects of love. With the short-term aspect, the decision is made that one person loves another. In the long-term aspect, commitment is implemented in order to sustain the relationship. “Love at first sight” does not contain a decision or a commitment. “Love at first sight” does include passion, one component of this triangular theory on the nature of love. Passion motivates one person to seek out another. “It includes physical attraction and the drive for sexual expression” (Sternberg as cited in Hyde and Delamater, 2011). By this definition, the Disney characters demonstrate passion when they meet or see each other but according to the theory, passion is only one component in love and therefore, “love at first sight” does not align with reality.

### True Love's Kiss

“True love’s kiss” as mentioned earlier was a romantic element that was actually created by Disney. I define “true love’s kiss” as the first kiss a couple shares with one another; this kiss guarantees their feelings to be genuine and true. Moreover, this special type of kiss is only shared by couples who are supposed to be together, committing themselves to marriage. The unrealistic romantic expectation that is birthed from “true love’s kiss” is that one kiss predicts true love. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, Prince Charming searches throughout the land until he discovers Snow White in her glass coffin. He walks to the coffin and tenderly kisses her, and suddenly, she awakens. Prince Charming then places her on his white horse and they ride off into the sunset together, toward his palace. Though neither is well acquainted with each other, their one kiss solidifies their affection for one another.

In the movies, *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, “true love’s kiss” plays an extremely significant role. Ariel makes a pact with the sea witch Ursula, who agrees to transform Ariel’s fish fins into legs, for a price. In exchange for her legs, Ariel must give Ursula her voice and sign a contract containing Ursula’s mandated requests. Ursula enlightens Ariel with the following statement: “Now here’s the deal. I will make a potion that will turn you into a human for three days. Got that? Three days. Now, here’s the deal. Before the sun sets on the third day, you’ve got to get dear old princy to fall in love with you. That is, he’s got to kiss you. Not just any kiss—the kiss of true love. If he does kiss you before the sun sets on the third day, you’ll remain human permanently.” In this speech, the character Ursula places specific importance on “true love’s kiss.” The fate of Ariel’s future rests on one kiss. With the *Beauty and the Beast* movie, Belle and

the transformed Beast share a kiss near the end of the movie. While they passionately kiss, fireworks explode. Indeed, their first kiss can be called magical. Shortly after, they dance together as a committed couple in the ballroom within the castle.

Disney presents “true love’s kiss” as a norm which I have found not to be the case in real life situations. Moreover, I have yet to meet any individuals who report that the first kiss they shared with someone indicated they were meant to spend the remainder of their lives together as a serious, committed couple. Therefore, Disney is creating a false reality for women.

### Indication Symbols

Indication symbols are romantic elements that are used to indicate if the couple is meant to be together long-term. These symbols create the unrealistic romantic expectation that people will know if they are meant to be together by clear, symbolic signs. For instance, in *Cinderella*, the indication symbol is the glass slipper. Two glass slippers are given to Cinderella by her fairy godmother in the middle part of the film. While running away from the ball, Cinderella loses one of her glass slippers. This slipper is taken the following day to every maiden in the kingdom. Before Cinderella is able to try on the glass slipper, it is broken through the devious methods of her wicked stepmother. However, Cinderella happens to have the other slipper. Cinderella then tries on the slipper. The next scene flashes to her climbing into an elegant carriage after she has married the prince. The prince knows Cinderella is the one for him because her foot fit the slipper.

Again, a simple indication symbol is used in *The Little Mermaid*. In one scene, Prince Eric briefly sees Ariel and hears her lovely voice as he comes to consciousness



after the ship wreck. When humans approach, Ariel quickly swims away. Later in the film, Ariel transforms into a human and ventures onshore to find Prince Eric. In exchange for a pair of human legs, Ariel's voice is taken away. When Prince Eric sees Ariel for the second time, he believes she is the one who saved him from the ship wreck. However, once he discovers she lacks a voice, he quickly dismisses this idea. Although Ariel displays many positive inward qualities such as kindness, sense of adventure, and loyalty, Prince Eric still does not readily recognize she is the right girl for him. Only once Ariel's voice is returned to her does Prince Eric finally "recognize" Ariel and decides she is the girl of his dreams. A few scenes later, Prince Eric and Ariel are kissing and sailing off into the sunset.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, the indication symbol is a single red rose that is carefully protected under a glass cover. In one scene, the character Belle almost touches the rose, and Beast becomes enraged. Interestingly, if Belle breaks the spell on the Beast and the other castle occupants before the last petal falls, everyone will be free from the curse. The only way the spell can be broken is through Belle loving the Beast and the Beast also loving her in return. Belle can be the right woman for Beast only if she breaks the spell before the rose expires. Belle breaks the spell just as the last petal falls. Then, Belle is recognized as being the right match for Beast.

In the three Disney movies mentioned, clear and simple signs are displayed which indicate that the characters are a good pair. These signs such as the voice, the glass slipper, and the rose can be either seen or heard and are focused on beauty—either in appearance or melody. They are iconic, outward, flashy symbols. However, real marriage compatibility signs are somewhat more complicated.

Consequently, no evident signs exist that guarantee a relationship will last. However, certain characteristics are most valued by both sexes (Eastwick, Finkel & Eagly, 2011). Furthermore, those who match one another's character preferences are more likely to have a longer and healthier marriage (Buss & Barnes, 1986). Psychologists Buss and Barnes (1986) conducted a study that ranked 76 characteristics from most desired to least desired. They found ten characteristics that were most valued in a mate by both men and women. These include the following: good companion, considerate, honest, affectionate, dependable, intelligent, kind, understanding, interesting to talk to, and loyal. Furthermore, the characteristics that men and women desired in the opposite sex were also explored. Women were found to most desire men who were considerate, honest, dependable, kind, understanding, fond of children, ambitious and career-oriented, and tall. Additionally, men who possessed a good earning capacity, preferential family background, and an admirable reputation were also desirable. On the other hand, men preferred women who were physically attractive, frugal, and talented cooks. Moreover, the characteristics of physical attractiveness were shown to be more important to men whereas good earning potential and college educated were shown to be more important to women.

Another study was conducted by Eastwick, Finkel & Eagly (2011) that looked into ideal characteristics among partners. It was found that at the initiating stages of relationships, individuals who match other's partner ideal preferences are not shown "preferential treatment from our hearts." However, ". . . once a relationship has been established, the match between a current partners traits and the pattern of our ideal partner preferences may ultimately affect relationship well-being." This shows certain

characteristic trait preferences are important for the success of healthy relationships and future marriages. Physical attractiveness is an outward characteristic and so is monetary gain. However, most characteristics in the studies mentioned are inward and complex. The Disney movies seem to focus on clear symbolic signs instead of human characteristics.

### Marrying Up

“Marrying up” is a romantic element that is seen in *Cinderella*, *Beauty & the Beast*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. “Marrying up” can be defined as one character marrying another character of higher social status. The unrealistic expectation that arises from the use of this unrealistic romantic element is that women have a likely chance of marrying richer men. In *Cinderella*, the prince immediately marries Cinderella after he learns she is the one whose foot fits into the glass slipper. Cinderella’s transition from poor servant girl in her own household to wealthy princess is shown to be easy and uncomplicated.

Similarly, in *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle is merely a meager farm girl who is shown to wear plain clothes and help her father in his inventor’s shop. However, by the end of the movie, she is seen waltzing with the prince in his glorious castle, and her impending marriage to the prince is implied. The character Snow White in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* may be slightly different because she is a princess by birth. Nonetheless, her social status is reduced by her evil stepmother in her own castle. Regardless, Snow White is still joined to Prince Charming in marriage by the end of the film. Prince Charming has considerable more social status than Snow White.

This type of financial marriage jackpot might sound exciting, but it is not reasonable. People like others who are most similar to them, including similar in social status. The term homophily describes the tendency for people “. . . to have contact with people equal in social status” (Hyde & Delamater, 2011). Some may think short-term partnerships do not require homophily. Yet, interestingly, Hyde and Delameter say they are “. . .as homophilous as marriages” (Hyde & Delamater, 2011). Therefore, women should understand that unless they are of high social status, they will most likely not marry a man of high social status. Of course, there are always exceptions but the exceptions do not dictate the reality for the majority.

### Opposites Attract

A similar romantic element to “marrying up” is “opposites attract.” “Opposites attract” transpires when different characters come together with completely opposite physical looks, attitudes, and values whereas “marrying up” ensues when characters join together with completely opposite social statuses. The unrealistic romantic expectation that can be created by “opposites attract” is that it is possible for two opposite characters to form a relationship that leads to a happy marriage.

The movie that especially uses the romantic element “opposites attract” is *Beauty and the Beast*. In appearance, Belle is as beautiful as Beast is ghastly. Belle is a human while Beast is an animalistic creature. Belle considers others first, including her father while Beast only thinks of his own troubles and desires. For instance, Belle agrees to spend the rest of her days in the dark and dreary castle in order to save her father’s health and ultimately his life. Beast only agrees to let her father go and take Belle in her father’s place because he sees personal gain from the exchange. If he can convince Belle to fall in

love with him, the spell will be broken, and he will be free. Belle uses rational and logical thinking while Beast's behaviors are shown to be ruled by impulse and anger. Still, by the end of the movie, the characters overcome all their strikingly opposite features (or traits, characteristics) and care for one another, falling in love and living "happily ever after" in wedded bliss.

This type of movie may bring hope to those who have partners are opposite from themselves. They may think that although they have many striking differences, their relationship will last. However, research shows quite the contrary. People who actually make the best pairs for one another are those who are most similar to one another. "One of the clearest trends to emerge from the literature on human mate selection is that romantic partners tend to resemble each other, both in overall attractiveness (Feingold, 1988; Murstein, 1986) and on a wide array of specific characteristics, including physical traits, age, education, race, religion, mental abilities, personality traits, and social attitudes" (qtd. in Ellis & Kelley, p. 118-119). Social psychologists called this type of pairing based on similarity the matching phenomenon.

### Conclusion

The media do influence American culture. Six powerful companies continue to have commanding voices regarding what Americans should think, feel, and buy. In the same vein, romantic movies, such as Disney fairytales, tell women what to expect in relationships. Because these movies target not only adult women but also young girls, the unrealistic messages in those films begin to affect women's minds at a very young age.

My definitive view is that movies about relationships should promote harmony between women's emotional and logical facets instead of causing conflict. Unstable

marriages are one of the many risks involved with unrealistic romantic expectations.

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, The Little Mermaid, and Mulan* help perpetuate unrealistic romantic expectations by containing certain romantic elements such as “happily ever after,” “love at first sight,” “true love’s kiss,” “indication symbols,” “marrying up,” and “opposites attract.”

As demonstrated, “Happily ever after” gives viewers a false reality. Relationships rarely ever reach a permanent peak of happiness and tranquility as shown in the Disney movies that contain this romantic element. Certainly, “happily ever after” is misleading. Long-term relationships require daily cultivation, patience, and hard work. Still, some of the most valuable things in life require the most work. Love must have time to grow. “True love’s kiss” unduly implies that love can be determined by one kiss. However, some of the best kisses in a relationship most definitely occur after a couple has been a relationship with one another for an extended period of time.

“Indication symbols” for predicting a successful relationship are not iconic flashy signs such as a glass slipper, a melodic voice or a rose. Rather, they are inward characteristics and attitudes. Women do not usually “marry up” to men, contrary to what Disney films depict. Instead, women typically marry their equal in social status. Substantiated by examples, “Opposites attract” also perpetuates false expectations. Opposites may attract but they do not necessarily stay together. Opposites may experience initial attraction, but that attraction fades as the ways in which the two people are opposite become increasingly evident. Those who are most alike have longer and more successful relationships. Therefore happy endings for two characters such as *Beauty and the Beast* are not realistic.

The reason I conducted the analysis on these five films is not because I have an inward distaste for Disney. I simply believe like with all romantic movies, that Disney movies should be watched with a degree of caution because they contain many messages that can potentially cause harmful unrealistic expectations that conflict with reality. My hope is that future researchers explore other topics that may be unrealistic such as “a man can be changed by a woman,” “love means one individual finding another who will be responsible for their happiness,” “the perfect setting is needed in order to confess one’s love,” “let something go and if it is meant to be, it will come back,” and “deception in relationships.”

The American media indeed do influence women, but knowledge is the key to their resistance to this eventual detrimental influence. Knowledge is an antidote to the poison of a false reality. Awareness and stimulating group discussion of the messages movies contain promotes a fun, proactive, and healthy movie experience. Ultimately, it is the viewer who should exert influence over the media messages instead of the media exerting undue influence over the audience.

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