

FAIRY TALE FEMALES:

WHAT THREE DISNEY CLASSICS TELL US ABOUT WOMEN

Spring 2002

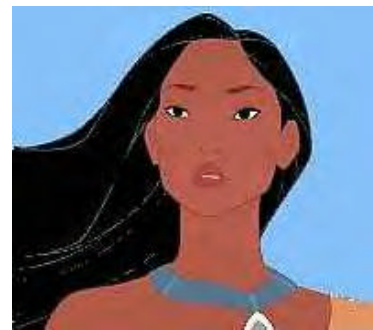
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www.kstrom.net/isk/poca/pocahont.html

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HCOM 475 CAPSTONE

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WHAT THREE DISNEY CLASSICS TELL US
ABOUT WOMEN**

Debbie Mead

DEDICATION

To: **Joel**, whose arrival made the need for critical viewing of media products more crucial,

Oliver, who reminded me to be ever vigilant when, after viewing a classic Christmas video from my youth, said, “Way to show me stereotypes, Mom!”

Larry, who is not a Prince, but is better—a Partner.

Thank you for your support, tolerance, and love.

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Once Upon a Time

“Once upon a time . . .” the phrase that has started a multitude of stories, has led us to tales of princesses, heroes, evil queens and wrongs righted; tales made into Walt Disney animated motion pictures. Yet, fairy tales include more subtle messages than just those of hero and heroine. They also include portraits of who a heroine is and what makes her a heroine. The Disney classics *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Pocahontas* have clear messages about female beauty, women’s relationships with one another, and women’s relationships with men. To study these messages, I will compare the Disney version of each story to its original fairy tale or historical account then discuss the historical context in which each feature film was introduced. Then, with the help of a group of sixth graders, I will discuss the messages about beauty, relationships with other women, and relationships with men that these films contain.

The Origin of Fairy Tales

Traditionally, fairy tales were used as entertainment and as a way to teach lessons to their listeners.¹ Through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, European women, house-bound with their spinning wheels and household chores, would listen to folk tales relayed by a traveler, a

¹ Jack David Zipes. Fairy Tale As Myth: Myth As Fairy Tale. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999, 19.

merchant, a member of a religious order ², or even a professional storyteller.³ In cultures throughout the world, fairy tales and folk tales were passed down through oral tradition, but in Europe this exclusivity of oral tradition ended in the 1600's. During that time, aristocratic French women,⁴ Frenchman Charles Perrault,⁵ the German Brothers Grimm,⁶ and others changed this European oral tradition into a written one. Many years later, as Disney animation took the entertainment value of fairy tales to new heights,⁷ the messages contained in these stories continued to be sent and received. In the case of Pocahontas, Disney took a legend, based on limited historical data, from the early 1600's⁸ and wove a tale of its own, further expanding the legend and changing the messages of the original story.⁹

² Jack Zipes. "Introduction" Beauty and the Beast and Other Classic French Fairy Tales. New York: New American Library, 1989, ix-x.

³ James Stern, ed. The Complete Grimms Fairy Tales. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972, vii.

⁴ Jack Zipes. "Introduction," xi-xiv.

⁵ A.E. Johnson, ed. Perrault's Complete Fairy Tales. London: Penguin Books, 1961, vii.

⁶ James Stern, viii-ix.

⁷ Jack David Zipes. Fairy Tale As Myth: Myth As Fairy Tale, 74.

⁸ Grace Steele Woodward. Pocahontas. University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1969, 63.

⁹ Gary Edgerton and Kathy Merlock Jackson. "Redesigning Pocahontas: Disney, the 'white man's Indian,' and the marketing of dreams." Journal of Popular Film and Television. (Summer 1996) v24 n2 p90, 94.

Fairy Tale/Legend versus Disney story

SNOW WHITE

According to John Grant's Encyclopedia of Walt Disney's Animated Characters, Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was based on the



Brothers Grimm version of the tale,¹⁰ titled "Little Snow-White."¹¹ In the Grimm version, the huntsman fails to kill Snow White because she begs for her life; in the Disney version, the huntsman stops himself from killing her because he

cannot bear to harm the fair princess. The Grimm Brothers include a scene where the Queen has her cook salt the heart she believes to be Snow White's, after which she eats it. Disney allows the Queen only to treasure the heart in an ornate box. While Disney's dwarfs, each with his own name (based on his dominant personality trait), are slovenly and content to be so, the Brothers Grimm portray the dwarfs as tidy, and use the terms "the first one, the second one, etc.," to refer to an individual dwarf. Grimms' dwarfs offer Snow White refuge in their home only on the condition that she cook and clean for them. Disney inverts the scenario and has Snow White *offer* to cook and clean for the dwarfs and make them "goose berry pies."

¹⁰ John Grant. Encyclopedia of Walt Disney Animated Characters. New York: Hyperion, 1993, 149.

The Queen makes three attempts on Snow White's life in the Grimm version, twice while she is disguised as a "pedlar-woman[sic]," and the final, and successful attempt, while the Queen is disguised as an old woman selling apples. Disney retains only the latter, with detailed visuals and additional story time showing the Queen mixing her potion, drinking it, and transforming into an old woman before the viewers' eyes. In the Grimm story, the Prince (referred to as "the King's son") makes his first appearance at the end of the story. After Snow White has been rendered unconscious by the poison apple, the dwarfs lay out her body for viewing and pine over their loss. Then the Prince appears. Enchanted with her beauty, he carries her off to "prize [her] as my dearest possession." While carrying her away, he stumbles over a tree stump, which jars Snow White and dislodges the poison apple from her throat. She regains consciousness, immediately receives a proposal of marriage from the Prince, which she immediately accepts. They do not kiss. The Queen is forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes at Snow White's wedding until she drops dead.¹²

Disney allows Snow White to meet the Prince earlier in the story, when the Prince hears Snow White singing to the animals as he is passing by on his horse. He stops to sing a short duet with Snow White, who timidly runs away from him. Later in the story she yearns for him with her song

¹¹ James Stern, 249.

"Someday my Prince will come," but doesn't see him again until the end of the story. At the end of the Disney version when the dwarfs realize that the Queen has poisoned Snow White, they chase after her. Still disguised as the old woman, she climbs to the top of a rock formation and tries to dislodge a boulder that will roll down on the dwarfs. Instead, she falls off the cliff and (presumably) dies. In the meantime, Snow White, still unconscious from the poison apple, is enshrined and worshipped by the dwarfs as in the Grimm version. However, Disney concludes the tale by having the Prince arrive at the scene and kiss Snow White. With the spell of the poison apple broken by "love's first kiss," they ride off toward the castle together to "live happily ever after."¹³



CINDERELLA

Charles Perrault's version of this fairy tale was the basis of the Walt Disney feature, says Grant's Encyclopedia of Walt Disney's Animated Characters.¹⁴ According to Perrault's story, Cinderella's father does not die, but after he marries a second time is "entirely ruled by his wife," who spoils her own two daughters and

¹² James Stern, 256-258.

¹³ Snow White.

¹⁴ John Grant, 226.

treats Cinderella like a slave.¹⁵ In the Disney version, Cinderella's father is dead.¹⁶ There is little physical description of characters in Perrault's tale. The stepsisters are never described as ugly, nor is there any indication of the fairy godmother's appearance. While the animals in this tale are utilized by the fairy godmother as coachman and horses to draw Cinderella's carriage, they are not portrayed as singing, sewing, or helping with household chores, as they were in the Disney version. The written fairy tale portrays Cinderella attending the ball on two consecutive evenings, forgetting the midnight deadline only on the second evening. Disney allows Cinderella to attend the ball only once. Both versions have Cinderella's glass slipper being tried on by all the available females in the kingdom, but Disney allows the stepmother one more bit of evil before the end of the story when she locks Cinderella in her upstairs bedroom to keep her from trying on the slipper. While Disney doesn't tell us what happens to the stepmother and stepsisters when Cinderella marries the Prince and moves to the castle,¹⁷ Perrault concludes his version with Cinderella forgiving her step-sisters, allowing them to live in "apartments in the palace," and finding them suitable marriages to "gentleman of high rank about the Court."¹⁸

¹⁵ A.E. Johnson, 55-56.

¹⁶ Cinderella.

¹⁷ Cinderella.

¹⁸ A.E. Johnson, 64.

POCAHONTAS



In making an animated version of Pocahontas, Disney added yet another story to the dozens already contributed by biographers, historians, and descendants of this Native American woman. Of the sources I consulted, all concur that during the time Pocahontas knew John Smith, she was between the ages of 10 and 12,

while Smith was 26 or 27. None discussed a romantic or sexual relationship between the two. Instead, what developed between Pocahontas and John Smith was a friendship based on curiosity of each other's people, with the desire to learn each other's language. In fact, Pocahontas is credited with teaching Captain Smith a number of new Powhatan words during his stay in Virginia.¹⁹ Of the rescue of John Smith, the climax of the Disney film, there are conflicting reports. Some sources say that the story

¹⁹ Grace Steele Woodward, 55-56.

was a fabrication by John Smith,²⁰ while others believe that the incident was a Powhatan adoption ritual directed by Pocahontas' father, who was adopting John Smith into their nation.²¹

Of course, it is possible that Pocahontas' actions were indeed a rescue based on the friendship previously formed, as some historians believe.²² However, Disney takes this friendship one step further by advancing the age of Pocahontas by several years and turning the long-term friendship into a short-term romance.²³ Also, at no time did any of my sources affirm the Disney assertion that John Smith saved the life of Pocahontas' father.²⁴

Film Release Dates and Analysis of Historical Influence

Snow White—1937

Just 17 years after women were given the right to vote,²⁵ Disney presented its first animated heroine, Snow White. The year prior to the movie's release, the Communist Party ran a candidate for President, and the Spanish civil war began.²⁶ During 1937, the Hindenberg exploded, Amelia Earhart vanished during her attempted around-the-world flight, and the Supreme Court reversed previous rulings, demonstrating support

²⁰ "Pocahontas." Association for the Preservation of Virginia's Antiquities.
<http://www.apva.org/history/pocahont.html>.

²¹ Grace Steele Woodward, 70-72.

²² Frances Mossiker. Pocahontas: The Life and the Legend. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976, 81.

²³ Pocahontas. Feature. Produced by The Walt Disney Company, 1995.

²⁴ Ibid.

for the principle of a minimum wage for women.²⁷ The Great Depression was in its eighth year and despite government efforts to get people working, jobs were still scarce for many. Disney's *Snow White* reflects the simplicity of time. The characters all have simple clothing and only basic household items. Snow White is never adorned in glamour, even though she was reported to be a princess.²⁸

The difficult economic times of the Depression allowed for an emphasis on the belief that women's place was providing domestic support for her family in the home.²⁹ Perhaps this emphasis was the reason why Disney altered the Grimm version of the tale and portrayed Snow White as volunteering her assistance with household tasks, rather than the dwarfs insisting upon it, as in the Grimm version. Disney showed the audience that beautiful, kind women are willing to take on the domestic responsibilities of their loved ones, leaving the men (the dwarfs) available to earn a living.

"Safe, conventional messages" in movies were sought by 1930's movie censor Will Hays, according to The Unfinished Nation. Though some socially challenging films were released during the Depression, the most popular, mainstream movies were geared to divert attention away from

²⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed. The Almanac of American History. Greenwich, CT: Brompton Books Corporations, 1993, 439.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 472.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 473.

²⁸ Snow White.

the difficult economic times.³⁰ The theme of *Snow White* may have echoed the sentiments of Depression era United States citizens, who were experiencing hard times and were hoping that someone (their prince) would come to rescue them and turn their dreams into reality.

Cinderella—1950

Thirteen years after *Snow White's* feature film debut, 30 years after women could first legally vote; another animated Disney classic arrived in theaters.³¹ The racial integration of baseball was only three years old, schools were still segregated, and the Civil Rights movement was in its early stages.³² *Cinderella* reflects this attitude of segregation in that, like *Snow White*, all of its characters are Caucasian—even all the guests at the ball.

The terms *consumerism* and *national fear* could describe this time period in U. S. history. Middle class Caucasian families were moving to the suburbs, acquiring a television set, and buying a “family car,” but at the same time living in fear of attacks from communist countries.³³ The Cold War began during the climate of a jittery post World War II (WWII) nation, and faced one of its worst episodes of anti-communist hysteria during

²⁹ Alan Brinkley. *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997, 689.

³⁰ Alan Brinkley, 692.

³¹ John Grant, 226.

³² Eugenia Kaledin. *Daily Life in the United States, 1940-1959: Shifting Worlds*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000, 93.

³³ *Ibid*, 121-127.

1950. Legislation requiring all Communists to register with the attorney general (McCarran Act) was passed, Senator Joseph McCarthy lead hearings to expose Communists in the State Department, and U.S. troops entered South Korea in a “police action” to help stop the spread of communism from the north.³⁴

Women’s status, which had improved during WWII and its need for female contributions to the war effort, had returned to that of being valued for participation only in the domestic realm.³⁵ During this time more women were entering college, but only slightly more than one-third were graduating and less women than in the 1920’s and 1930’s were seeking advanced degrees. While war veteran males were utilizing the GI bill to seek higher education and possible career advancements, most colleges would not allow women with families to attend college part-time.³⁶ The character of Cinderella fits into this 1950’s prototype. She is highly domestic and reflects on the propensity toward consumerism of that era. In the film, she demonstrates the perks of consumer goods by attending the prince’s ball in a glamorous gown that sparkles, wearing long gloves, and glass slippers—a stark contrast to Snow White’s simple attire.

³⁴ James West Davidson, et. al. Nation of Nations: A Narrative History of the American Republic. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990, 1012-1016.

³⁵ Eugenia Kaledin, 99.

³⁶ Ibid, 106.

Reflecting on the need for control and order that surrounded the McCarthy era, Cinderella must restore the patriarchal order of her life in order to find happiness. She suffers greatly under the authority of other females (her stepmother and stepsisters), who are in competition with her for a smaller, post-WWII population of available men. Still, she seeks out a male, and marriage to free her from her oppressed state and to make her life fulfilled.

Pocahontas—1995

Though not yet officially given an era name, the 1990's have been termed the decade of "Machine Dreams" by Peter Jennings and Todd Brewster in their historical publication The Century, referring to the integration of technology, and all of its implications, into U.S. life.³⁷ Technology brought significant changes in the lives of women relating to their traditional roles. In 1995 alone, U.S. women produced "365 sets of quadruplets and 57 sets of quintuplets and sextuplets," brought about by fertility enhancing drugs.³⁸ On the other end of the spectrum, the ability to keep life going beyond one's desire for that life caused another controversy of technology. This controversy was heightened by the

³⁷ Peter Jennings and Todd Brewster. The Century. New York: Doubleday, 1998, 525.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 567.

emergence of assisted suicide advocates, in particular, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who by 1998 had participated in 100 official assisted suicides.³⁹ In contrast to the techno-world of 1995, is the story of Pocahontas. The Disney film clearly emphasizes closeness to nature, spirituality, and the Native American tradition of unity with one's ancestors.⁴⁰ Perhaps the Disney Company thought that audiences would find this film a pleasant escape from their techno-world.

In relation to the roles of women and minorities, Disney was long overdue for a non-Caucasian heroine. Women, particularly minority women, had made great strides since the Cold War days of Cinderella. Two years prior to the release of Pocahontas, the first "Take Our Daughters to Work Day" was implemented, and Hilary Rodham-Clinton became the first First Lady to be given an official job.⁴¹ Also in that year, Toni Morrison became the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.⁴² Pocahontas may have been a new type of heroine for Disney reflecting the newer woman of the 1990's. However Disney chose the same manner for her to seek her dreams—though loyalty to her father and romance with a potential mate.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Pocahontas.

⁴¹ James Trager. The Women's Chronology. New York: Henry Holt, 1994, 719.

⁴² Clifton Daniel, John W. Kirshon, Ralph Berens, eds. Chronicle of America. New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, Inc., 1995, 923.

⁴³ Pocahontas.

Messages

BEAUTY

To Disney, physical beauty is a demure, petite, Caucasian woman with a high-pitched voice. Says Jorget Harper in Hot Wire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture:

Disney takes Snow White's Caucasianity to extremes. Her nose is so small that she almost has none. Her profile is reminiscent of Lon Chaney, Sr. in Phantom of the Opera. And her thin upper lip appears to be immobilized in such a way that her upper teeth are constantly visible (the love-me-I'm-a-little-chipmunk look imitated by many girls ever since).⁴⁴

The Disney features, as well as the fairy tales on which they are based, contend that beauty is a woman's most important asset. Snow White and Cinderella have both beauty of appearance and beauty of disposition according to Disney, as if the two go hand in hand.⁴⁵ During research for this project, I surveyed three sixth grade classes, with the students viewing these films and answering questions about the characters and the messages. Of the boys who felt that Snow White is beautiful, 40% felt that it is due to her physical features only, 16% felt that it is due only to her personal characteristics (kindness, having a good heart, etc.), eight percent mentioned both physical and personal characteristics, 32% based their opinion on what the mirror said, and four percent reasoned

⁴⁴ Jorget Harper. "Snow White, Cinderella, and Bambi: That Disney Magic." Hot Wire: The Journal of Women's Music and Culture, 5, no. 3 (September 30, 1989): p. 24-28, 25.

⁴⁵ Kim Hongsook. "The Structure and Reconstruction of Marriage Scenarios in Picture Books for Children- A Comparative Study of Fairy Tales and Feminist Tales [Part 1 of 2]." Women's Studies Forum, 01021793. (1997): 138-147, 141.

that she must be beautiful or the prince would not have been interested in her. Of the girls, 23% mentioned only physical characteristics in affirming Snow White's beauty, 34% mentioned only personality characteristics, 20% included both, while only 17% believed the mirror. For six percent, the prince's opinion was the basis of their conclusion.

With regard to Cinderella's beauty, of the boys who responded that she is beautiful, 49% based their conclusion on physical characteristics only, 21% on personal characteristics only, eight percent on a combination of the two, 20% on the fact that the prince was interested in Cinderella, and two percent on the fact that the stepmother hated her and would not have if she were not beautiful. Of the girls, the distribution is different. Of those who claimed Cinderella to be beautiful, 28% gave reasons of only physical characteristics, 31% of only personality characteristics, 28% included both, while eight percent drew their conclusion based on the prince's interest, and five percent on the stepmother's hatred. Some notable individual responses to the question of

beauty in these films include one 12 year-old boy who responded that Cinderella's stepsisters are ugly "because they are evil and all the evil people are ugly." Another 12 year-old boy felt that Cinderella is beautiful because she "is shiny [sic] and [has] blonde hair." One 12 year-old girl felt that the root of Cinderella's beauty was her beauty of heart; she states, "She is very kind and obeys others even when they are mean to her."⁴⁶



Snow White's stepmother (the queen) is also beautiful, but she is surpassed in "fairness" by Snow White, due to her good heart. When questioned if the queen is beautiful, an overwhelming majority of the students said no, with various reasons—she's "mean," "cold-hearted," "jealous," "evil," and "old," or she has a "skinny, bony face," or a "dark and gloomy" face, or wears "too much make-up." One 12 year-old boy said that the queen is not beautiful because "she had no guy after her." Eight students cited the mirror's declaration that Snow White had taken the queen's place as "fairest" as the reason that the queen was not beautiful. Only one 11 year-old boy and one 12 year-old girl made the connection that the queen was still beautiful even though she was not the *most* beautiful, as she was "second beautiful."⁴⁷ The other students concluded that if the queen is not the most beautiful, then she must be ugly. No one mentioned the irony of the queen turning herself into an ugly, old woman, in order to eliminate her rival in beauty and attain the status and power that comes from male attention.

Through Disney, Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters are portrayed as ugly, at least in part due to their selfish and cruel ways. Cinderella's fairy godmother is a chubby, absent-minded, grandmotherly type, who is not threatened by Cinderella's beauty and therefore is allowed to help her. According to Elizabeth Bell in From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture, "Beauty, helplessness,

and passivity are the catalysts and rewards for destined marriage and money. Goodness is linked to victimage and martyrdom.”⁴⁸ Cinderella fits into this profile quite nicely.

The story of Pocahontas includes no other females with whom her beauty can be in contrast, and since she is a creation of history and not of fairy tale, the opportunity for realistic portrayal is greater. Historical painter Mary Ellen Howe says of Pocahontas, “Pocahontas was not a beautiful, svelte figure. Her head would have been shaved. She would have been naked. Later, at puberty, she would have gotten a deerskin apron.”⁴⁹ But the Disney’s Pocahontas isn’t even close in appearance to Howe’s description. In fact, Disney’s supervising animator Glen Keane used four models for their Pocahontas—paintings of Pocahontas herself, Native American consultant Shirley “Little Dove” Custalow McGowan, 21 year-old Filipino model, Dyna Taylor, and Caucasian supermodel Christy Turlington. Gary Edgerton and Kathy Merlock Jackson of Journal of Popular Film and Television commented that the Disney’s Pocahontas “emerged as a multicultural pastiche. They started with Native American faces but eventually gravitated to the more familiar and Anglicized looks of the statuesque Turlington.”⁵⁰ In other words, she is a typical Disney heroine.

According to the sixth graders, Pocahontas is beautiful; 92 % of the students said so. But a larger percentage of both boys and girls attributed Pocahontas’ beauty to physical attributes rather than other reasons—56%

of boys and 39% of girls—compared with 49% of boys and 28% of girls for Cinderella, and 40% of boys and 23% of girls for Snow White. Since Pocahontas is a more independent character than the other two, perhaps these students had more difficulty determining what constituted inner beauty (and there was no mirror to tell them).

Notable comments from boys about Pocahontas' beauty are: "For an Indian, yes" [she is beautiful]; "Yes, she has [beauty]. A 'white' man wanted to marry her;" "No [she is not beautiful], her hair is to [sic] long and she has long eyes." One 12 year-old boy felt that Pocahontas is smart "because she chose a good man." Nineteen percent of girls came to the conclusion that Pocahontas must be beautiful because she had two men interested in her. Six percent stated that Pocahontas didn't care about her appearance "because there is no one to look nice for." One 12 year-old girl said that Pocahontas is beautiful because of her "personality, and even a white person loved her."⁵¹

From the student's responses we can illuminate Disney's messages about female beauty. Disney beauty is Caucasian, preferably blonde and thin; it is affirmed by male attention. Beauty is a representation of good (beauty = good/good = beauty) and is mutually exclusive. If someone is considered more beautiful than you (by a magic mirror, perhaps), then you are ugly.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER WOMEN

In all three movies, the heroine has contentious relationships with nearly all the other women in her life. In *Snow White*, the only other woman included in the story is the queen, who tries to kill Snow White, so she can become “fairest in the land.”⁵² In fact, author Tatar contends that the film *Snow White* actually is harmful to female relationships, particularly mother-daughter relationships. Says Tatar, “It works too hard to efface any trace of maternal goodwill and to construct an image of feminine evil overpowering in its depth.” She also believes that the story “polarize[s] the notion of the feminine to produce a murderously jealous and forbiddingly cold woman along with a girl of ideal beauty and domestic genius.”⁵³ But Hongsook notes that this “estrangement is the necessary obstacle that heroines have to overcome in order to reach the goal of a happy marriage.”⁵⁴ Thus, women must disengage themselves from relationships with other women in order to connect with a marriage partner.



Cinderella's stepmother, stepsisters, and her fairy godmother are the only other females with whom she

comes in contact. The stepmother and stepsisters are cruel to Cinderella, competing with her for the potential affections of a prince, as Harper



contends, "We see female rivalry at its worst, in the spoiled, petulant, untalented, gawky stepsisters."⁵⁵ Cinderella's fairy godmother has limited power, able only to get her to the ball, with a

strict curfew, but not able to intervene to change any of the harsh realities of Cinderella's life.⁵⁶



Pocahontas consults with Grandmother Willow, an apparent physical manifestation of her deceased grandmother who appears in a willow tree, but Grandmother Willow's influence in Pocahontas's life is restricted. She can only be of service to Pocahontas when Pocahontas seeks out her advice. The only other female in the film, Pocahontas's friend, Nakoma, turns their relationship contentious when, going against Pocahontas's wishes, she tells Kocoum that Pocahontas is in danger, when she, in fact, has gone to meet John Smith. This action leads to the death of Kocoum, and John Smith's being accused of his murder.

The messages we can draw about women's relationships with one another from these films are that women are not trustworthy (at least not with other women), most likely because they are all in competition with one another for the same available men. And women must be estranged from one another in order to connect with a man.



RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN

In *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, the message regarding their relationships with men is simple: They must surpass their rivals in beauty and goodness to win the affection of the prince and be rescued by him. They will be married, as "her marriage with the prince is the key to her happiness."⁵⁷ For these two, any relationships they had with their fathers have been concluded and they are on their own to battle the evil women in their lives.

Pocahontas has a different relationship with her father. Her loyalty to her tribe is represented by her loyalty to her father, the tribe's chief. Yet, she still "reinforces another resilient stereotype that the main purpose of a Disney heroine is to further the interest of love,"⁵⁸ as she "falls in love with the first white man she



sees.”⁵⁹ In contrast to Snow White and Cinderella, who are rescued, Pocahontas rescues John Smith from death, but one must question her motive. Does she rescue him because of her romantic involvement with him, seeing him as a potential marriage partner? The sixth graders say yes. Sixty-eight percent the girls and the boys, when asked if Pocahontas would act the same way if she were not in love with John Smith, said “No.” Edgerton submits that while the film extols the “virtues of tolerance, cross-cultural sensitivity, and respect for others and the natural environment . . . These lofty sentiments are down-played by the film’s overriding commitment to romantic fantasy.”⁶⁰



Thus, the overriding messages about male/female relationships in these films conclude that romantic male/female relationships are the most important, or the only important, relationships between the two. With

regard to male attention, women should be beautiful, helpless, and patient enough to wait for a man to rescue her.

Conclusion

“Of all the early animators, Disney was the one who truly revolutionized the fairy tale as institution through cinema”⁶¹ making his films a wonderful visual and auditory experience. In such an appealing package, messages

are more easily received and retained. Messages about beauty, women's relationships with other women, and women's relationships with men have a long-lasting legacy in films that are shown to successive generations.

What are the messages about women in the three feature films *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Pocahontas*? Besides "some women are nice and some are mean" or "some women are beautiful and some are ugly," the sixth graders drew interesting conclusions about women from these films. From *Snow White* came the conclusions that women "always want to be beautiful;" "get jelish [sic—jealous] of other girls;" "are helpless;" "are evill [sic] and cry and men haft [sic] to save them;" "are strong in different ways;" "fight to be the best;" "always depend on there [sic] looks;" "could clean houses." From *Cinderella* we get: "good ladies get treated right;" "They don't have the courage to speack [sic] up;" "women should stand up for themselves;" "women can be ambishous [sic] and achive [sic] their dreams too;" "Women have the right to do everything they want;" "When they have a problem all they do is cry and 'hope' for a miricale [sic];" "that any woman can be a princess." From *Pocahontas* comes: "women can make big changes;" "they can be strong, courages [sic], and have authority;" "they can do anything a man can do, save and protect others, they are just as strong as men;" "Women can solve problems without vilence [sic];" "They are very independent;" "women really believe in love;" "some like nature and are adventures [sic];" "That

women does [makes] hard decision [sic] like Pocahontas;" "they can also accomplish big things like Pocahontas did;" "just because you are a woman doesn't mean you can't save the day." ⁶²

There are many different ways to "save the day," change one's life, or makes one's dreams come true—ways not presented in these Disney classics. So, in contrast to these movie messages of women who are helpless, waiting-to-be-rescued, and have beauty-as-their-only-asset, I offer a different kind of Fairy Tale.

No Princesses Here

Once upon a time in a non-enchanted castle on the edge of a kingdom lived a young woman named Cinderella. Cinderella was kind and loving, loyal, a bit stubborn at times, sometimes preoccupied, cranky when she got hungry, but caring and strong. She was fair of face, but had a small birth mark on her cheek; a slightly droopy eyelid from a chicken-pox scar; a crease in her nose from swiping upward with the heel of her hand during allergy season; old scars on her knees and elbows from jump rope, hop scotch, and tree climbing when she was a girl; and a left earlobe that was longer than the right. She was beautiful.

Cinderella lived in the castle with her stepmother and stepsisters, who treated her like a slave. Every day, Cinderella's stepmother, Lady Tremaine, and stepsisters, Drizella and Anastasia, ordered Cinderella about, giving her chore after chore to do and often making her redo a task just to assert their authority over her. Cinderella obeyed dutifully and did each chore in turn by herself. The

castle did have mice and birds who visited, but all that they contributed to the household were some peck marks, some chew spots, and some droppings for Cinderella to clean up. They were not the sewing, cleaning, talking, or singing types of creatures.

As Cinderella's parents were both dead, she had no role model to help her learn to be assertive and forthright with the other members of her household. All she had were her tall, sturdy, plain looking stepsisters, and their hard-faced, conniving mother. She lived an existence lacking pleasures and interests.

Cinderella did allow herself one indulgence, though. On market day she would stop by the public library and read for a short while before returning to her household drudgery. Through her reading, Cinderella began to learn some new concepts that she'd never known before. She learned about fairness, equality, compromise, sharing, partnerships, and cooperation. She also discovered that a person could learn just about anything they wanted to know from a book or books in the library.

One day, when Lady Tremaine, Drizella, and Anastasia were being particularly condescending to her, throwing their garments at her to fix as if she could turn their rags into gowns like some fairy godmother, Cinderella dropped all of their garments onto the floor and shouted at the top of her voice, "Enough!" The three other women were stunned into silence. Glaring defiantly at her step relations, Cinderella demanded, "Why do you hate me?"

"Because you're beautiful," answered Drizella.

"And graceful," included Anastasia.

“And charming enough to land a prince for your husband,” concluded Lady Tremaine.

“You hate me for what might be instead of appreciating me for what is?” Cinderella queried.

“Right.” They all nodded.

“You know we’re broke,” added Lady Tremaine, “and the ability to earn an upstanding living as a woman is limited. Not to mention how hard it is for women to keep any property. We have to have a man—a rich man—for financial security.”

“The more beautiful you are, the more likely a rich man will want to marry you and take care of you,” chimed in Anastasia.

“So your odds are better than ours,” summed up Drizella.

“Well, if we’re all going to go after the last split-pea in the soup bowl, then yes, someone’s going to lose out, but why does it have to be that way?” asked Cinderella.

“It’s *always* been that way,” said Lady Tremaine.

“But it doesn’t have to be,” Cinderella declared.

“What do you mean?” they asked, almost in unison.

“We can work together,” Cinderella stated enthusiastically. “Instead of giving me endless chores, so you’ll have more time to practice singing, dancing, curtsying, and finding other ways to impress a prince—something that may never happen—we can find ways to bring more money into the household and make our lot better ourselves,” she explained.

Lady Tremaine looked puzzled. “I still don’t understand, Cinderella,” she stated.

“Call me Ella,” said Cinderella. “I’m through with the cinders now.”

Through squinting eyes Lady Tremaine glared at Cinderella—now Ella.

“Just a minute now . . .” she began.

Ella interrupted. “Look Stepmother, you like to cook, right?” Lady Tremaine nodded. “But you haven’t had time because you’ve been coaching your daughters to help them catch a rich husband, right?” Lady Tremaine glanced at both of her daughters and nodded again, still watching Ella skeptically. “Well, we can put you in charge of the kitchen.”

“But that’s your job,” she said, pointing at Ella.

“I know, but if you do that job, I can have more time to work in the garden growing vegetables and fruits, and maybe I can increase our livestock so we can have more eggs, milk and cheese to sell at market. Then we could afford other foods that you could use to try out new dishes on us. Drizella and Anastasia can help me.” Ella looked encouragingly at her stepsisters. “Once we feel less shaky about our living situation, we can start taking some time to pursue our individual interests, not just the ones we think will make use look more cultured and interesting to princes. What do you say, women?” Ella’s eager gaze fell on each of their faces.

“I’m tired of primping and practicing ways to flirt. Call me Ana,” responded Anastasia, putting her hand out flat in the circle of the four women.

“And me Zelda” said Drizella, adding her hand.

“I’ll be May, . . . but you can call me Mother,” said Lady Tremaine looking at Ella. She placed her hand in the center with her daughters’. Ella swung her hand in the circle and they all looked at one another.

“What next?” asked Zelda.

“A plan,” answered Ella.

So the four of them plotted and planned and started the first co-operative castle in the kingdom. Each of them contributed to the household with her own skills and strengths and they all shared the benefits. They took turns going into town on market day, so that each woman would have an opportunity to visit the library to study her own areas of interest. The castle co-op prospered. Others in the kingdom saw the changes in Ella and her family, and they began to ask questions. Soon the word was out among the other women of the land about the castle co-op. Many maidens, tired of wishing upon a star, pining for their prince, or studying the princess guidebook, joined the four women. Some moved into the castle, bringing their talents, enthusiasm and energy, while others--widows, worn out wives, and maidens with strong family ties--visited and shared the companionship and nurturing environment of the castle, but lived elsewhere. They too added their own unique abilities to the pool of possibilities for the co-op. So occupied were they with their tasks and pursuits that no one paid attention to the notice from the Grand Duke that a Ball was being held for the Prince and that all of the maidens of the kingdom were invited to attend.

Ella made good on her promise of a useful garden. She cultivated peas, green beans, squash, soybeans, potatoes, and even had the early sprouts of an apple tree growing in her bedroom. The only plants that gave her trouble were her tomato plants.

One evening as Ella was returning to her room after supper, she noticed that the last of the tomato plants she'd so carefully tended had died. Tired from

the stress of starting a co-op and feeling a little pre-menstrual, she threw herself down on her bed and began to weep from disappointment. As she reached for a rag to wipe her eyes, she saw a chubby, gray-haired woman in a large, hooded, purple robe. Ella gave a start.

“Don’t be frightened, dearie,” the woman said sweetly. Her voice was high-pitched and slightly grainy.

“Who are you?” Ella asked.

“I’m your Fairy Godmother and I’ve come to help you make your dreams come true.”

“You know about tomato plants?”

“Tomato plants? No, dearie, I’m going to help you get to the Ball.”

“What Ball?”

“The Prince’s Ball. That’s why you’re crying, isn’t it---because you need a gown and a coach so you can go to the Prince’s Ball?”

“No, I’m crying because my tomato plants keep dying.”

“Really?”

“Well, I’m a little pre-menstrual too. What makes you think I want to go to the Prince’s Ball?”

“All girls do. They all want to meet and marry a prince who will make their dreams come true. At least that’s what they taught us in Fairy Godmother school.”

“They need to update their lessons,” said Ella blowing her nose. “I’m working on making my dreams come true, and they don’t necessarily include a prince.”

“Oh dear, if all the girls start thinking like you, I’ll be out of a job,” the Fairy Godmother fretted.

“Then come live with us,” Ella suggested. “We work hard, but we have fun too. And we learn about things that interest us.”

“Is that so,” the Fairy Godmother pondered. “You mean you can change yourselves too?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll let you in on a secret, dearie” said the Fairy Godmother motioning for Ella to come closer. Ella stepped nearer and the Fairy Godmother slid the hood down off her head. Behind the patch of gray hair that stuck out from under the hood shined a full head of vibrant red hair.

“What happened?” Ella asked, glancing around the Fairy Godmother’s head.

“They make us do this. I really don’t have any gray hair at all. In fact, I look like I’m 60, but I’m only 36.”

“Then why do you dye part of your hair gray?”

“Oh you should see what I have to do to remain plump, grandmotherly, asexual, and non-threatening. My last cholesterol reading was nearly 300 due to all the fatty foods I eat to stay chubby. I can speak 10 languages, but I have to pretend I’ve lost my wand in each language, because scatterbrained Fairy Godmothers are more endearing.”

“That sounds awful,” declared Ella. “You must come live with us . . . dearie.” Ella eyed her slyly.

“Call me Dawn,” said the Fairy Godmother. “I’ve got to take care of a few things, but I’ll be back in the morning, with some new clothes and a footlocker full of wands.”

“Until then,” said Ella smiling as she watched the Fairy Godmother—Dawn—fade and disappear.

So Dawn moved into the castle co-op, lost 35 pounds, and got her cholesterol down to 175. She offered the other women a course in how to be a Fairy Godmother, but no one came to the classes. When she switched to offering language courses, her classes filled rapidly. Her wands came in handy too. They were used for directing the Co-op Women’s Glee Club, and the Co-op Band; Lady May traded a few to the peddler, Alfonse, for some new cooking utensils; and Ella used them to prop up drooping plants in her garden.

The Grand Duke made frequent visits to the castle, as he and Zelda were learning woodworking together. They were making a dining room table with a complete set of chairs, so that all members of the household and visitors could sit down together for one of Lady May’s creative culinary experiences. The Grand Duke, who preferred to be called Edgar, helped the co-op with trades and purchases in other parts of the kingdom and outside the kingdom. He became a trusted friend.

One day as Ella was passing through the receiving hall, hauling freshly harvested vegetables to the kitchen from her garden, she heard a knock on the castle door.

“Enter,” she yelled, not wanting to put down her perfectly balanced armload.

In strode a tall, handsome, regally dressed man.

“I would like to speak to the man of the household,” he declared, striking an authoritative pose.

“Speak,” said Ella balancing her basket against the wall.

“You’re the man of the household?”

Ella nodded. “Unless you’d like to talk to Lady May, Zelda, or Ana.”

“They don’t sound like the man of the household either.”

“No men live here. You’ll have to visit another residence to find one,” she concluded re-balancing her basket and walking away.

“No wait,” he called. Ella stopped.

“I’m the King’s son,” he stated. “My name is Prince Charming.”

“How do you do.” Ella nodded at him.

“I’m looking for a princess.”

“There are no princesses here,” she told him.

“I know. . . I mean. My father has been hosting Balls for me, inviting all the available maidens in the kingdom for me to choose a bride—my princess—but no one shows up. They’re all here, according to the Grand Duke.”

“Oh, Edgar. Yes, he comes here a lot. With all due respect, sir, I doubt anyone wanted to go to your Ball,” she stated bluntly.

“Why not?”

“Well, some might have been too tired after aerobics, or too relaxed after yoga class. It might have been Mother’s tofu surprise night and they didn’t want to miss it. Zelda has been building wood furniture, Ana’s finally got enough fabric to finish drapes for all the upstairs bedrooms, and those of us with time in the

evenings after all the chores are done usually like to read or study . . . or maybe you had a Ball on the night that the co-op players debuted the Widow Yvon's play." Ella breathed. "Besides . . . have you ever worn a corset?" she asked.

"No."

"How about glass slippers?"

"No."

"Well, let me tell you, one misstep by your dance partner and you'll spend the rest of the evening having shards of glass picked out of your foot."

"But doesn't anyone want to be my princess and come to live with me in the King's castle?"

"Let me ask you . . . Where is your mother?"

"Dead"

"Did she die young?"

"Yes," he answered lowering his head.

"And your grandmothers, did they die young?"

"Yes."

"Did any female in your family make it to age 40?"

He thought for a few seconds, then answered, "No."

"So, Sir Charming, the King's castle doesn't sound like a very inviting place for a woman."

"But all of you have to work so hard here. In my father's castle you would have servants and luxury . . ."

"Overrated," replied Ella. "Luxury makes one bored and too lazy to learn new things, and having servants means oppressing someone. I've been on the

non-princess side of oppression and I wouldn't ever want to do that to anyone else."

"I don't understand," said Prince Charming, leaning against the wall for support. "This is not what my father told me about women."

"He's a bit out of touch," she informed him. "Women are all different. The women here don't want to give up their independence for the sake of financial dependence, a title, and all the trappings that go with it."

"Well, what should I do?" asked the prince. "My father wants me to marry someone in the kingdom."

"Come to supper tonight," suggested Ella. "We'll put your problem up for discussion."

At supper, Prince Charming explained his dilemma to all the women there--and Alfonse and Edgar--who were visiting. No one gave suggestions at first, but rather asked the prince questions, some out of curiosity, and some out of sincere desire to help their guest. No one offered to marry him.

A long discussion about how the prince could please his father ensued until finally Ana asked him, "What do *you* want to do?"

After a long period of silence, the prince said, "I don't know. No one has ever asked me that before." He took a deep breath then spoke again. "I know what I *don't* want to do. I don't want to wear these uncomfortable outfits and learn how to wage war. I know I like people paying attention to me and listening to what I have to say, but usually I don't seem to have anything important to say. I just say the things my father has coached me to say."

"It's true," nodded Edgar.

Lady May cleared her throat. “May I make a suggestion, your royal highness?”

“Of course, good lady,” the Prince returned.

“There is a cottage down the road where a widower lives. He has an extra room now, since his son left the kingdom in search of his fortune. Rent a room from him and visit us daily. We’ll help you find your path to the future.”

So, Prince Charming, who now wanted to be called Ted, moved into the rented room, with the help of Edgar, and visited the castle co-op every day. The people there helped him map out his desires, list his wishes, and catalog his responsibilities. Then they had him prioritize and pinpoint areas of potential compromise. When he had finished, he returned to his father’s castle to discuss his future.

The King delighted in seeing his son again and greeted him warmly. Ted explained to his father where he’d been and what he’d been doing. Then he laid out his plan for leadership of the kingdom, when he, the prince, would come to rule. He explained the steps he would need to start taking in order to be ready to govern when the time came. When he had finished, the King, red with fury began raging about tradition and forbade Ted from ever setting foot near the castle co-op again. Ted tried to explain that these ideas were his own, but the King would not listen to him.

The King summoned Edgar and demanded that he order the general army to loot and burn the castle co-op, but Edgar refused. The King threw him in the dungeon. The guard, a friend of Edgar’s, allowed him to slip away that night, and he took refuge in the cottage of the widower.

Finding no one who would attack the castle co-op, the King decided to take on the job himself. He saddled his horse and traveled to the edge of the kingdom, to the castle he despised. Alfonso the peddler had warned the castle women of the King's rage and they were prepared for him. They were not about to let him destroy all their hard work.

By the time the King arrived, the women had surrounded the castle, holding hands to keep him from getting in. The King came forward slowly and poised in front of Ella. He raised his sword in preparation to strike her. She stared directly into his eyes. At that moment Dawn yelled, "Now!" and all the women began pelting the King with wands of various shapes and sizes.

The startled King dropped his sword and retreated. As his horse clopped along, preparing to jump over the moat, a wand rolled under its rear hoof and caused the animal to lose its balance. Both the horse and the King tumbled into the water.

The women retrieved the King and his horse from the moat, but both were near death. Zelda and a few of the women took charge of caring for the horse, while Ella, Ana, Dawn, and rest tended to the King. With his life no longer in danger, Edgar volunteered to take Lady May to deliver the distressing news to Ted.

Upon hearing the story of the King's condition--his attempted attack on the castle co-op and his near drowning--Ted rushed to his father's side. The Prince helped the women care for his father for several days, but knew that he must return to the King's castle to assume leadership of the kingdom in his

father's absence. He left his father at the co-op, knowing that the King was in capable hands.

The King recovered slowly, ever conscious that he tried to destroy the castle where he was now recuperating, and eliminate the residents who cared for him so diligently. Part of reason the women of the co-op watched the King so closely was to make sure that he could not threaten them again. But the King had learned not to be so hasty in his judgments of others, and never again sought to harm the castle co-op.

Prince Ted led the kingdom in a fair and compassionate manner while his father recuperated. And when the King returned to his duties, riding the horse he rode during his attack on the co-op, he shared leadership of the kingdom with his son. The two always remembered the daily life and struggles of the co-op members, and others in the land, in all their decisions.

As his father wished, Prince Ted did marry a woman from the kingdom--a woman from the co-op. A strong bond between the kingdom's leaders and the castle co-op remain from then on. The widower died shortly after the King's return and Alfonse and Edgar moved into the cottage near the co-op and got his and his matching towels. They remained dear and loyal friends to their neighbors for the rest of their lives.

Lady May became the most famous culinary expert in the kingdom. She traveled far and wide, demonstrating and teaching cooking skills to everyone in the tri-kingdom area. Zelda married a carpenter, who built many of the homes in the kingdom, which Zelda then filled with her hand-crafted furniture. They had three children: Pine, Oak, and Madera. Ana became a world-renowned

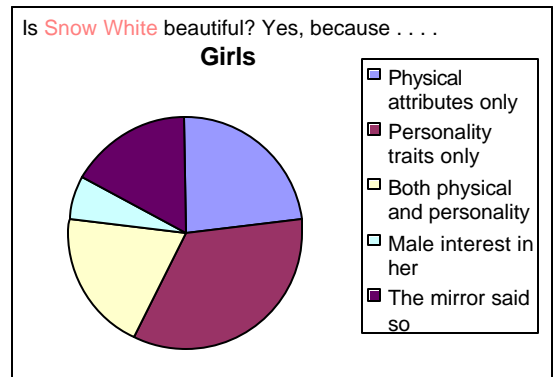
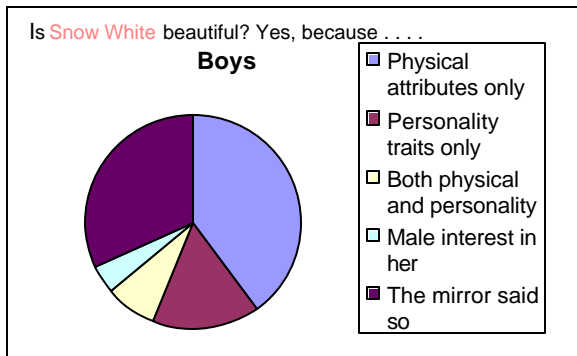
dressmaker. She was known as the clothing designer who fit a real woman's body. No matter how famous or wealthy she became, she always returned yearly to visit the castle co-op and made generous donations every month.

Ella left the kingdom the year after Ted's marriage. She traveled from town to town setting up co-operatives for all the disenfranchised women in each land. She made frequent trips home to visit her family, who always treated her with dignity and respect, as she had done with them. They had good lives now, and despite the usual problems, frustrations, and illnesses, they all lived happily ever after.

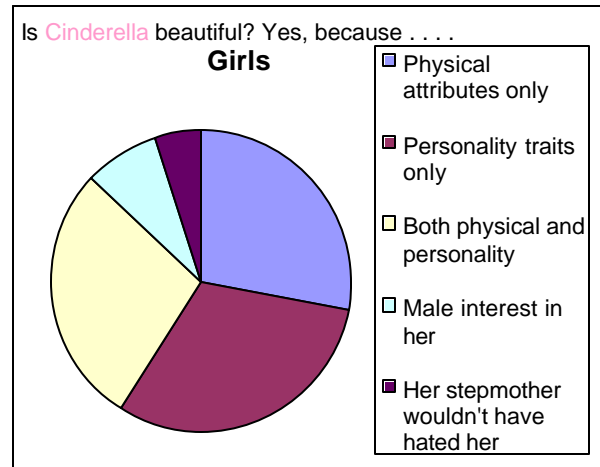
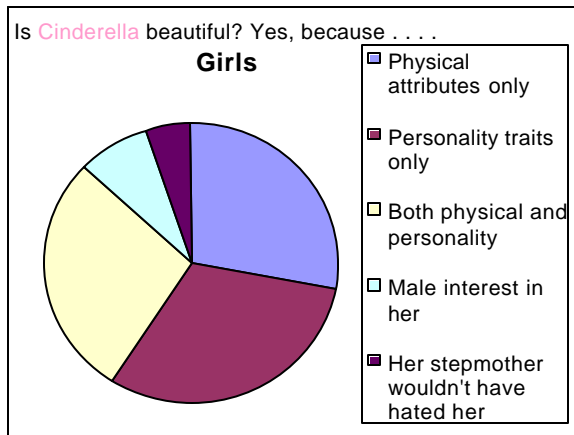
APPENDIX

Reasons why each character is beautiful, sorted by gender:

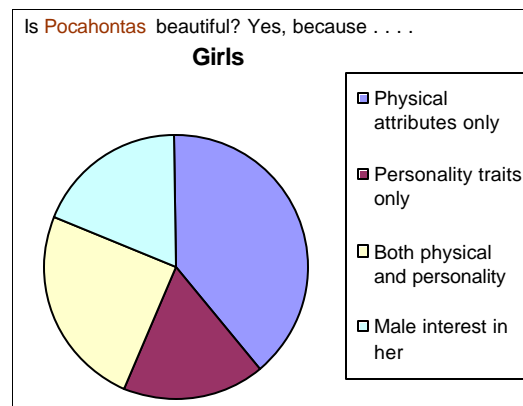
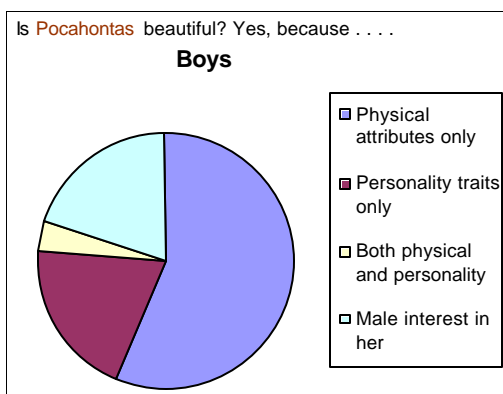
Snow White



Cinderella



Pocahontas



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PROSPECTUS

Working Title: Fairy Tale Females: What three Disney's classics tell us about women.

Topic Description: I plan to analyze the messages about females in the three Disney classic movies *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, and *Pocahontas*. I will compare the Disney stories to the original fairy tales/historical accounts and describe the social climate in the U.S. during each release date (1937, 1950, 1995, respectively), which may have influenced Disney's perspective on each story. Then I will analyze the message to and about females in each film with some input from some 11 and 12 year olds. To finish my project, I will creatively rewrite one of the stories with a more feminist perspective.

Learning Outcomes:

- MLO2 Research
- MLO8 Creative Writing—rewriting one of the fairy tales with a more female empowering view.
- MLO5 Critical Cultural Analysis—analyzing the cultural impact of these Disney classic films that are shown to successive generations of children.

Research Questions:

1. What are the original stories upon which each movie is based?
2. How do the Disney versions differ from the original stories?
3. How would the date of movie release affect the messages in the film?
4. What are the messages about females in each film?
5. How could one of these stories be told differently?

Research Plan: I've research the original stories of the three films and the significant events and general cultural atmosphere of the U.S. during the time periods when the films were released (1937, 1950, 1995). I've also viewed all

three films carefully and critically. I plan to incorporate a survey of 6th graders, asking questions about the films' messages that they answered after viewing each film. To conclude, I will rewrite one of the stories with a more female friendly slant.

Form/Format of final capstone: Written analysis based on research questions, with a creatively written revision of one of the stories to better serve the interests of females.