

# Disney Princesses in the Classical Era

OTSUBO Fumina

The purpose of this thesis is to examine two “classical-era”<sup>1</sup> Disney princess movies, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950), in relation to key historical events and facts in America between 1900 and 1959.

## 1. Historical Facts (1900-1928)

### 1-1. Limited roles for women in society.

Until the turn of the twentieth century, Victorian values<sup>2</sup> permeated society, and women were expected to fulfill traditional gender roles of supporting their husbands and raising their children. In addition, women were restricted in that they could not decide their own actions or even sign their own contracts. In other words, women were treated as if they had no power or agency. Women at that time were expected to be ideal role models, to be “the moral guides of their families” (Kibler 378). A common way for women to engage in society was through various volunteer activities. Through these activities, women created strong friendships is called to the bonds of a sisterhood (Kurihara 7). At the beginning of the 20th century, as the Victorian era values began to wane, women began to insist on gender equality.

### 1-2. Suffrage movement.

Until 1910, the women’s suffrage movement was conducted only at the state level. In the U.S., there were only twelve states that allowed suffrage for women. In that era, *the National Woman’s Suffrage Association* (NAWSA) established a committee to advocate for voting rights for women to be ratified as a constitutional amendment. Alice Paul, one of the representatives of the committee, established *the National Women’s Party* (NWP) in 1916. Thanks to the efforts of this organization, the 19th Amendment passed in the Lower House in 1917, and in the Upper House two years later. Eventually, this amendment was adopted in all of the states in 1920, thus giving the right to vote to twenty-six million women (Kurihara 19).

According to Kurihara, the “women’s suffrage movement was the symbol of the women’s movement because it aimed to consolidate political democracy. In addition, this crusade not only intended to gain suffrage, but also aimed to improve the social status of women in the U.S.” (20). As a result of this movement, a new type of woman known as a flapper appeared in the 1920s. Flappers were liberated from prevailing Victorian era values. According to Benschhoff & Griffin (211), a flapper was “a young, urban, career-oriented woman who quickly became a cultural stereotype”. According to Kibler, “commercial leisure was political because it redefined the social and sexual boundaries of women’s lives; it was also political because it helped some women in marginalized communities negotiate cultural citizenship” (379). As a result, the appearance of this new female stereotype was important for helping define what it meant to be a woman at that time. Overall, the image of women in society began to diversify due to the progressive feminist movement.

### 1-3. Romance novels by Laura Jean Libbey.

While the trend in mainstream society was primarily about women seeking greater independence,

some working-class women, known as working girls (Yamaguchi 4), prioritized escape over liberation. From the late 19th to early 20th century, working women were featured in the novels written by Laura Jean Libby. Libby's stories always focused on a poor, working-class heroine who toiled for hours at some boring and exhausting but dead-end jobs and dreamed of escape via marriage to a rich and handsome man. According to Yamaguchi, many women identified themselves to the heroines of Libby's novels (118). Even when women gained the right to vote, the enticing allure of a life lived happily ever after with a Prince Charming remained.

## **2. Historical facts (1929 -1959)**

### **2-1. The Great Depression.**

On October 24th, 1929, the stock market crashed at the New York Stock Exchange. Many workers went on strike, companies went bankrupt, and the U.S. economy fell into a Great Depression. Itabashi & Takeda notes that the number of unemployed people rose from 1.55 million in 1929 to 12 million in 1932 (154). During that time, Franklin Roosevelt was elected as the new U.S. president. In an effort to bring the country out of depression, he began a series of policy reforms that became known as the New Deal.

Life struggles brought about by the Great Depression were reflected in movies of the time. For example, men took the initiative in asking women to do anything (Benshoff & Griffin 219). During the depression, Hollywood movies sexualized the appearance of female characters in order to gain more customers. The government began to censor the contents of films more because a sexualized woman was seen as inappropriate. In order to survive this wave of censorship, various Hollywood movie studios proposed the set of industry moral guidelines called the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, in 1930. This code was enacted in 1934 and applied to most films until 1968. Owing to this code, excessive sexual expression and violence were eliminated from movies.

### **2-2. World War II and after.**

When World War II (WWII) broke out in 1941, many men gave up their jobs to go to war as soldiers. This opened up opportunities for women to take over the jobs that those men had left behind. In fact, at that time, the government encouraged women to leave their homes and traditional roles in order to help out with the war effort. For example, women were encouraged to join the Women's Army Corps (WACs) or Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES) in order to make military supplies such as bombs, guns, and ammunition. Benshoff & Griffin pointed out that the pre-war definition of an ideal women, which was soft, passive, and weak, turned into a new definition of strong, proud, and capable of doing men's work, like the "Rosie the Riveter" character dramatized on numerous propaganda posters (222).

After WWII, the men returned from the war to their previous careers. Consequently, women had to leave their war jobs and go back to their traditional homemaker roles. The government and mass media, which had been exhorting women to work, tried to encourage their return to pre-war status, suggesting that the only way for women to gain real happiness was through marriage and childcare. However, these efforts to push women back did not largely succeed (Benshoff & Griffin 222).

A new film genre, known as film noir, began in the late 1940s, after the war. In these films, a backlash to traditional gender roles took place. A new stereotypical female character, called a femme fatale or black widow, began to appear in such films. These characters were not princess-like at all. Instead, they were strong and powerful "women who lured men into their sphere of influence and would just as easily murder

a man as marry him” (Benshoff & Griffin 222-223).

To review key points from this chapter, at the beginning of the 20th century, Victorian era values began to wane. The 19th constitutional amendment was adopted in of the states in 1920, thus giving the right to vote to women. On the other hand, between 1890 and 1910, the old-fashioned romantic novels by Laura Jean Libby were popular among working class women, showing that traditional female roles were still popular. A new type of woman known as a flapper appeared in the 1920s. In the 1930s, Hollywood movies sexualized the appearance of female characters in order to gain more customers. Then, in 1934, the Hays Code, which eliminated excessive sexual expression and violence in movies, was enacted. World War II opened up opportunities for women to take over the jobs that the men had left behind. However, once the war was over, women were asked to go back to their homes and traditional roles.

### **3. Princesses who marry a prince**

This section examines the common characteristics of Snow White and Cinderella, the two classical-era representatives.

#### **3-1. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).**

Snow White is the first Disney princess. Her story is based on a novel by the 19th century German writers, the Brothers Grimm. When this movie was released in 1937, it became very popular. For example, the box office tally was \$66,596,803 (Box Office Mojo n.d.), an extraordinary amount of money for the time.

In the beginning of the movie, Snow White is dressed in rags and performs menial chores even though she is the sole heir of the royal family. When escaping from her evil stepmother, she finds a hut where seven dwarves live. She persuades them to let her stay in their home by playing up her housekeeping skills: “And if you let me stay, I’ll keep house for you. I’ll wash and sew and sweep and cook and...” (00:38:46 – 00:38:52). In this way, she starts her new life as a housekeeper. In addition, she acts like a mother when she says to the dwarves, “March straight outside and wash, or you’ll not get a bite to eat” (00:41:26 – 00:41:30). The dwarves accept her maternal authority. She feels pity for the dwarves for not having their mother; thus she decides to take on this role for them. Owing to her beauty and devotion, the dwarves trust her.

Snow White works as much as possible, but when it comes to deciding her own path, she shows her passive nature. In the movie, she does not act spontaneously and always seems to accept whatever situation she finds herself in. As a result, she receives some rewards for being passive. For example, she always seems to experience unexpected good fortune just at the right moments, like when she meets the prince at the castle despite being oppressed by her stepmother. Similarly, when she flees from the queen, animals in the forest lead her to the dwarves’ hut. Since she is an angelic figure who lacks agency, she is protected by the people and animals around her.

In addition to being quite passive, Snow White can easily trust others, nearly to the point of naïveté. While her stepmother, the Evil Queen, is planning to kill her, she cannot sense the Queen’s wicked intentions. When Grumpy, a dwarf, disapproves of her sharing the hut, she does not care. These episodes epitomize Snow White’s passive and innocent nature.

Snow White’s characteristics correspond to the image of an ideal woman in American society at the time of the film’s release. Do Rozario points out that:

Under the peasant costume, Snow White is a 1920's/ 30's starlet with a flapper haircut, rosebud mouth, and high-pitched warble. She matures in the Depression and is happy to pitch in with the working class dwarves in a time of high unemployment and poverty until she is found once again by her prince (38).

For the female audiences of that era, when it was not natural for women to decide their own life paths, Snow White was the embodiment of an ideal mother.

### **3-2. *Cinderella* (1950).**

Cinderella is the second Disney princess. The story is based on a novel written by a 17th century French writer, Charles Perrault. Although not quite as popular as Snow White, the film earned \$10,000,000 at the box office in 1950 (Box Office Mojo n.d.), which was still a lot of money at the time.

Though Cinderella was born in a rich family, she is treated like a servant by her stepfamily. She wears rags and toils at home on housework, much like Snow White does. She obeys her stepfamily. While she occasionally complains about their irrational orders, she never disobeys them in the movie. In other words, she persists in a much harsher environment than the one she belonged to in her early years. A narrator at the beginning of the movie defines and emphasizes her key characteristics (00:03:02 – 00:03:13)

Cinderella remained ever gentle and kind, for with each dawn she found new hope that someday...her dreams of happiness would come true.

This quote indicates her optimistic yet passive nature, similar to Snow White. While she serves as an indentured servant to her stepfamily, she does not take any action for escaping her status quo, except on deciding to go to the ball. However, even though she wants to go, she has no way to get there on her own. When she can not spare the time to make her own dress, some animals make it for her. In addition, a fairy appears and transforms her into a girl who wears beautiful attire. She also creates a fancy horse-drawn carriage. In other words, she receives magical gifts as a reward for her obedient and passive nature. This characterization matched the 1950s trend of women returning to their homes and obeying traditional feminine roles after WWII. Cinderella's character can be said to have encouraged this trend.

In the movie, Cinderella sometimes refers to her dreams via the credo that "a dream is a wish your heart makes" (00:04:20 – 00:04:26). However, she never explains what her dream actually is. When she speaks about her dreams, she looks at the castle through the window in her room, implying her greatest desire is to live there.

At the end of the movie, Cinderella finally gets married to the prince. As she runs for the carriage from the wedding hall, the background music swells with the words, "Have faith in dreams and someday your rainbow will come smiling through. No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing. The dream that you wish will come true" (01:13:34 – 01:14:04). This song implies that Cinderella's deepest dream was to get married to the prince. She always believes in her "dream," and it finally comes true as a reward for her traditional femininity.

Overall, Snow White and Cinderella have two main points in common. First, both women come from rich families, lose their parents, and are then forced to live in impoverished, oppressive circumstances. Second, they are both rewarded for their passivity and obedience. Both Snow White and Cinderella wish for marriage and a life happily ever after with a prince and finally they gain them because they endure and

go through suffering given from their stepmother. Even as women were beginning to struggle to open up new political and cultural horizons in the larger society, the two movies did not reflect these changes.

In this way, even though *Cinderella* was released thirteen years after *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and the situation of women in the American society had changed considerably during the thirteen years, these two movies take on a similar appearance. American women began to claim their rights to vote, and they achieved them in 1920. The situation of American women had gradually changed since the 1920s, but Disney movies did not reflect the change. Like one of Libby's novels, they continued to provide the traditional scenario of how women seek and achieve happiness: the scenario in which women are saved from adversities and predicaments by their "Prince Charming," thereby gaining happiness.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hefner defined the period in relation to their release date (513).

<sup>2</sup> The Victorian values of women had four virtues: piety, chastity, obedience and domesticity (Kurihara 6).

## Works Cited

- Benshoff, Harry M. and Griffin, Sean. *America on Film Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*. Blackwell Publishing, 2004.
- Cinderella. *Box Office Mojo*. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=cinderella1950.htm>
- Disney, W. (Producer). & Geromini, C. & Hamilton, Luske. (Director). *Cinderella*. United States: Walt Disney Pictures & Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1950. Disney Theater.
- Disney, W. (Producer), & Hand, D. (Director). *Snow White and the seven dwarfs*. United States: Walt Disney Pictures & Walt Disney Animation Studios, 1937. Disney Theater.
- Do Rozario, Rebecca-Anne C. “The princess and the magic kingdom: Beyond nostalgia, the function of the Disney princess.” [PDF file]. *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 27(1), 2004, 34-59.
- Hefner, Veronica., Firschau, Rachel-Jean., Norton, Katie.and Shevel, Gabriella. “Happily ever after? A content analysis of romantic ideals in Disney princess films”. *Communication Studies*, 68(5), 2017, 511-532. doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2017.1365092.
- Itabashi, Yoshie. and Takeda, Kennichi.『シリーズ・はじめて学ぶ文学史② はじめて学ぶアメリカ文学史 [Series: The History of Literatures for Beginners II The History of American Literature for Beginners], Minerva-shobo, 2014.
- Kibler, M.Alison. “Women at Play in Popular Culture”, In *The Oxford Handbook of American Women’s and Gender History*, Oxford University Press, 2018, 375-390.
- Kurihara, Ryoko. 「1 第一波フェミニズムをめぐる女性運動史」[Chapter 1 The history of women who involves 1<sup>st</sup> feminism waves]. In Watanabe, Kazuko. (Ed.), 『アメリカ研究とジェンダー』[*The American History and Gender*]. Sekai-shisoshu, 1997, 2-21.
- Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. *Box Office Mojo*.  
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=snowwhite.htm>
- Watanabe, Kazuko.「2 第二波フェミニズム運動の軌跡と理論」[Chapter 2 A trajectory and logic of the second wave feminist movement]. In Watanabe, K. (Ed.), 『アメリカ研究とジェンダー』[*The American History and Gender*]. Sekai-shisoshu, 1997, 23-46.