

Alice and Wendy: Disney's Other Evolving Female Roles

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Essay 3

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Introduction

She eagerly looks out onto a wide open meadow, then runs out and smiles at the tall grass and wildflowers. She is spinning, twirling without a care in the world, completely free. What will she do? What will she be? In her mind, there are no limits on the future; anything is possible. She sees miracles; she sees everything. She feels no restrictions. Her mind goes wild with the possibilities of what tomorrow could bring and what her life could be. She is on top of the world. This is the girl we want to see, a girl who dreams big and doesn't let expectations constrain who she can be. We want her to go beyond an ordinary existence; we don't want her to settle. We want her to explore and find her passions. We want her to imagine.

The influential philosopher Plato had a different view; he separated ideas from physical things. To him, imagination would be an unreal, unimportant concept, and Plato's ideas carry on today. Imagination is not appreciated, but it is an important component of girls' development, and it should be nurtured into adulthood (Eckhoff, et al. 185). Education journal writers Angela Eckhoff and Jennifer Urbach state that, "By nurturing students' imaginative thought, early educators are preparing students to become creative thinkers and problem-solvers who have the capacities to explore difficult problems and issues in new and innovative ways" (185). Imaginative girls will be more equipped to serve in society in the future (Eckhoff, et al. 185). Parents, teachers, and companies realize that imaginative people are an asset to society; they want people to think creatively (Eckhoff, et al. 185; Madjar, et al. 730). The world wants and needs

women who live and think with originality (Eckhoff, et al. 185; Madjar, et al. 730).

However, “stereotypical” and “traditional” have become the leading descriptors in talking about women and gender roles (Zarranz 55).

Historically, Disney has been one of the most imaginative film companies. When Disney is connected with the issue of gender roles, especially femininity, the princess characters take center stage. From concerned parents to active feminists, many worry about the implications of Disney princess films (Orenstein 8-9). Parents approach the princess characters with apprehension, and they fear that the Disney media will mar children’s concept of gender roles (Orenstein 62-65). The Disney princesses have been cause for criticism of the company, as the characters do not seem to display modern values of femininity (England, et al. 554; Downey 186). Author Rebecca Collins states that the media presents women in too much of a traditional role, and feminist critics like Peggy Orenstein agree that Disney princesses do this (Collins 290; Orenstein 62-65). However, they disregard the female character growth throughout the history of Disney films (England, et al. 554). Disney critics fail not only to recognize a shift in female characters’ roles over time in accordance with cultural value changes, but also to examine Disney’s non-princess fairy tale movies.

Disney has moved beyond the damsel-in-distress picture of womanhood (Do-Rozario 566; Zarranz 56). Women in Disney’s fairy tales are becoming increasingly more active and resourceful; the female characters are starting to see possibilities beyond ‘traditional’ expectations. Disney princesses have transformed from the servant-like Snow White and Cinderella to the visionary Tiana and the adventurous Rapunzel. Disney

has transformed female norms in the company's rendering of other fairy tales, too. Over time, Disney has gotten closer to depicting and encouraging the kind of imaginative girls that we so long to see. Princesses are not the only characters to grow, though. The non-princess films, particularly *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan* are crucial to the conversation of women's roles, because they provide a more varied viewpoint on the topic. Because these movies do not end in marriage, as most of the princess movies do, they offer a new look into what it means for a girl to grow up into a woman. Since the outset of Disney films' focus on leading young women with the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the way that women are depicted has been continually evolving, even within the same stories. This is especially evident in the contrast between female portrayals in the original and later versions of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*, two of Disney's most imaginative creations.

1951 *Alice in Wonderland*

The earliest movie in this sequence is *Alice in Wonderland* (1951). Zarranz, who wrote about Disney's changing female roles, thought that critics would expect a Disney movie to convey the 'traditional' view of women and their place in society, and the 1951 *Alice in Wonderland* does (55). In this original version, Wonderland adventures teach young Alice that convention is the path to follow. In the opening, Alice does indeed desire something beyond conventional existence, as evidenced by her lack of interest in her studies and her song about longing for a world in which everything would be "nonsense." She is a curious girl. She does not like the idea of becoming what all other women become; she wants something greater out of life. However, her sentiment for the

impossible fades as the movie plays out. She comes to dislike all of the random, impossible things that she had dreamt of experiencing. In her life, she is stifled, and she rebels against her societal structure, but she ends up embracing it and leaving behind her hopes of a different, more fulfilling future. She cannot pursue her progressive dreams, because that is not a part of the natural order of a woman's life. For Alice, a girl becomes a woman when she parts with childish thoughts, learns devotedly, and adopts respectable behavior in every circumstance, in contrast to organizations' and school administrators' support of creative thinking (Eckhoff, et al. 185; Madjar, et al. 730).

First, it is important to note that the story of *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) shifts the focus off of Alice herself. Her adventures in Wonderland are told through the lens of all of the other characters, rather than from Alice herself. As soon as she enters Wonderland, the male characters steal the show. The picture centers on the Cheshire Cat, the Caterpillar, the March Hare, and the Mad Hatter. Alice is present, at the "un-birthday" party, with the caterpillar, and with the cat, but the picture almost completely focuses on the male characters, fitting with Collins' observation that women are not present enough in media (290). The March Hare becomes the character of interest from the time that Alice enters Wonderland. Despite Alice's attempt to tell her story, the "un-birthday" party centers on the March Hare and the Mad Hatter breaking a watch and subsequently trying to fix it. The caterpillar and the cat dominate their conversations with Alice; the story all but ignores its main character. Alice's story is no longer her own; she is more of a bystander than an active participant in her adventures.

Alice is at her wit's end when it comes to dealing with adversity; she simply cannot handle the thought of getting herself out of trouble. This demonstrates Disney's original damsel-in-distress portrayal of women. Alice is passive in the 1951 version of the film. She calls for help (the opposite reaction that the new Alice has in the face of conflict) and literally cries a river when a task seems too difficult for her to accomplish. She has virtually no level of toleration for difficulties. Alice simply resigns herself to the situation in which she finds herself; she is not proactive enough to do anything about the circumstances. This quality opposes author Madjar's value of creative thinking in the work place, which includes "tak[ing] risks," something that the original Alice cannot fathom (730, 734). Her worldview has led her to believe that she is incapable of changing anything, because the society that raised her implies that a woman's place is one of subordination and complete dependence. In the 1950s world that Alice was created in, women were expected to make their lives at home exclusively. Alternatives to staying at home were limited, so women lacked opportunities to grow beyond the home. Because Alice was raised in that society, she never learned how to handle being on her own, and she breaks down at the first sight of a problem.

While Alice claims to dislike living up to what is "proper," she displays the "proper" qualities within herself. She wears a nice dress, and she looks well put-together. Her vocabulary reveals the extent to which the societal structure and the place of women are engrained in her thinking. She repeatedly responds to struggles by remarking with "oh dear" and "oh my." She constantly sits up straight and conducts herself respectably, unable to open her mind to the imagination of Wonderland. Alice displays perfect posture

throughout the silly “un-birthday” party. She retains her civilized air throughout the film; she speaks softly and evenly, even when she yells at the caterpillar. When Alice runs after the March Hare, her body remains more upright than it should, which signals her attachment to proper behavior.

Although Alice originally wants the impossible world, she is ultimately unhappy with it. She attempts to make Wonderland more civilized, by saying that the flowers “could learn a few things about manners.” She shows contempt for childish imagination and unusual, original thinking when she says, “that would be nonsense,” and later, “oh the silly nonsense; this is the stupidest tea party I’ve ever been to in all my life. Well, I’ve had enough nonsense—I’m going home, straight home.” Alice does return home, and she eagerly resumes her tutoring. She is ready to leave imagination behind to embrace what is expected of her, supporting Collins’ finding that women in media often have traditional roles (290). The story concludes with the thought that growing up for girls involves leaving behind out-of-the-box thinking to take up a traditional role. The story implies that all girls must make this exchange eventually, because in the end Alice discovers that adventure and impossibility are overrated and she has a new enthusiasm for average, traditional life.

The Original *Peter Pan*

Just two years after *Alice in Wonderland* (1951) came out, Disney released the company’s 1953 edition of *Peter Pan*. Like the first *Alice in Wonderland*, this version of *Peter Pan* minimizes girls’ significance. Wendy wears a nice nightgown throughout the movie, stressing the acceptable way for women to be in her society, dressed up and

pretty. While she tells stories about Peter Pan to her brothers, she does not participate in John and Michael's pretend pirate fight; that would not be proper behavior for a girl. Wendy carries out a pitcher of water and a bowl while her brothers pretend to be Captain Hook and Peter Pan and swing wooden swords at each other. She smiles at them and admires her brothers' enthusiasm for make-believe, but she keeps her distance from their game as she fulfills her household duties. Like hosts of female representations in the media, Wendy maintains her traditional role (Collins 290). Even Nanna, the female dog, focuses on her household chores rather than participating in the boys' game. Rough play in Wendy's world is for boys only, as they will grow up to be the sole protectors in a family of their own, while the girls are expected to live and work exclusively in the home.

While Wendy's character presents most of *Peter Pan*'s ideas about women, Tinker Bell provides insight, too. Even though the fairy comes from a land of imagination, she is consumed by the female stereotype. Tinker Bell fits with Collins' finding that the media often portrays women in "revealing" attire (294). Throughout the film she wears a short, tight dress which highlights her curves. While Tinker Bell is in the Darlings' house, she finds herself standing on top of a mirror. She cannot keep herself from peering into it to examine her body. When she looks into the mirror, the fairy observes her thighs and cannot hide her discontentment. In Disney's 1953 version of *Peter Pan*, the stereotypical view of women touches even the imaginary beings.

Peter Pan relays his own view of girls and their place through his behavior, too. When he meets Wendy, he stops her when she tries to talk to him. He rudely snaps at her,

“Girls talk too much!” Wendy is dismayed, but she does not defend herself or correct his flawed worldview. Whether it is acceptable or not in Wendy’s culture for men to treat women as inferior, it seems that it is normal for a woman to hold her tongue if she is treated with such contempt, supporting Collins’ view of women as inferior characters in media (290). When Peter is in Neverland, he goes so far as to ignore Wendy altogether, preferring to focus on the brazen, fawning mermaids. Even when the mermaids “only try...to drown” Wendy, Peter brushes it off casually, saying “they were only playing.”

Peter also gives the Indian princess Tigerlily more attention than he gives Wendy; When he goes off ahead of Wendy she yells, “Peter, wait for me!” and even then she has to run to catch up to him. He treats girls as something to save, but not something to treasure. He expresses no concern whatsoever for her or her well-being, and he favors the girls who cater to him, as though they represent the way women should be. He thinks girls should be dependent on and inferior to boys; his view on women’s place corresponds to the way that lot of television, games, and music depicts women (Collins 293-294). Peter does not have much interest in Wendy, who is initially more independent than the other girls in the story, though not so assertive and active as the new Wendy is.

Wendy’s character simultaneously displays independence and modesty, but she shows her weakness when she allows others to disrespect her. Wendy does not brag or flaunt, like the other girls in *Peter Pan* do. When Wendy is at home, she is said to create wonderful stories of Neverland and share them with her brothers, which goes against conventional female behavior. She flies off to Neverland, despite what people might think about her, but she lets Peter Pan insult her at least three times, without standing up

for herself. When Wendy is captured by Captain Hook, she does not attempt to escape or change the situation at all. Pirates hold Wendy, her brothers, and the lost boys captive, but Wendy simply resigns herself to the idea that “Peter Pan will save us.” She tells her brothers to “be strong” before she walks the plank, exhibiting traditional female passivity. This scene not only reveals her helplessness without a boy, but also shows her view that women shouldn’t try to protect themselves or anyone else. She, her brothers, and the lost boys could have been drowned by the pirates, and she was not going to do anything about it. Wendy remains “subordinate” to Peter and the pirates (Collins 290).

At the end of the story, the Darling parents and Wendy idealize Peter Pan so as to suggest that he embodies all that is innocent in childhood. In so doing, the Darlings support his disrespectful behavior toward Wendy. Disney’s *Peter Pan* (1953) ends with the Darling children returning home. Wendy returns saying that she is now “ready to grow up.” She still believes that her experiences in Neverland were real, but she wants to part from the impossible world and welcome the standard way of life. Her decision is not as drastic as the original Alice’s is, though. While the first Alice actually ends up holding the impossible world in contempt for its lack of civility, Wendy admires the adventurous world, but chooses to let it go, which shows Disney’s more developed thought process, though not as advanced as the recent *Peter Pan* (2003) does.

Wendy: Remade

In *Peter Pan* (2003) as produced by Disney fifty years after the original film, the outlook is different. Wendy has higher hopes for her life than other people do. At the beginning of the story, Wendy tells her family that she dreams of “writ[ing] a great novel

in three parts about [her] adventures...I've yet to have them, but they will be perfectly thrilling." She knows that her future is full of possibilities, and she is ecstatic when she tells her family what she hopes to do with her life. Her Aunt Millicent meets her dreams with disdain, saying, "There is nothing so difficult to marry as a novelist." Everyone expects Wendy to groom herself for marriage, seemingly the only path for a young woman to take. Alice's society reflects Collins' idea that the media often shows women in "relationship roles," but Wendy herself has hopes outside of relationships, even though she values them (295). Wendy herself realizes the need to grow up, but she also has big dreams and keeps the adventure alive as she grows up.

Like the original, Wendy tells fairy tales, but the new Wendy does more than just tell stories; she initiates action. Unlike the original Wendy, she is not afraid to be proactive or defend herself. She takes up a sword to fight for not only herself, but also for her brothers and the lost boys. The 'stereotyped' role of girls is fading, though Collins notes that women are still 'stereotyped' in various mediums (290). Wendy is not so set on fulfilling stereotypes or being proper that she refuses to play pirates with her brothers at home or fight real pirates in Neverland. Wendy proudly and gladly wields a sword in both instances. Disney is no longer defining girlhood by 'proper' behavior, but by adventurism.

Wendy keeps her integrity throughout the story; she is not harsh, but she is assertive. She boldly lets the lost boys know that she has contemplated becoming a pirate. She knows that she is just as valuable as boys are, and she believes that she is just as capable as boys are. Wendy realizes that she is equally as significant as a boy is; her

confident quality resists the general media concept that girls are minor compared to boys (Collins 290). When Captain Hook offers Wendy a position on his ship, she considers becoming a pirate because she sees herself as equal to boys. Wendy knows that she can do the job, but she chooses to decline the offer because she would rather ally with Peter Pan and the lost boys. She is confident of her value, skills, and ability to make decisions.

Wendy is not the only character that recognizes her value, though; Peter Pan does, too. She is not “subordinated,” opposing Collins’ general assertion about how women are represented in the media (290). At the Darlings’ house, Peter wants to listen to Wendy, and he puts effort into convincing her to come to Neverland. Peter Pan asserts that “one girl is worth twenty boys,” in stark contrast to the original Peter Pan, who often ignored Wendy. The new Peter saves Wendy, but he also cares for her. He rescues her from the pirates, but he does so because he cares about Wendy and her fate, not to show off. He goes beyond simple heroism when he has the lost boys “build a house around [Wendy]” when she gets shot. This view of women as important is crucial to Disney’s female role shift. The female is important, and she can have a relationship with a male character, without dominating the male or being dominated. Disney’s new perspective on women avoids the extreme of tradition and the extreme of feminism.

The original version of *Peter Pan* separates the real from the imaginary and implies that all girls must trade in the imaginary for the real world. However, in the new version, imagination and childlike belief save the day. The new film suggests that these concepts are powerful tools for girls, and that they are important in all stages of life, as Madjar and Eckhoff stress (Eckhoff, et al. 185; Madjar, et al. 730). Towards the end of

the film, Peter professes his belief in fairies, and Wendy starts a fairy chant on the pirate ship. Once Wendy calls out, “I do believe in fairies” everyone, young and old, in Neverland and the real world, participates in the powerful cry of belief in fairies, which breathes new life into the dead fairies. The whole world is affected. Wendy’s unhampered imagination is cultivated further by her adventures in Neverland. When Wendy decides to return home, she takes some of the impossible world with her; the lost boys come with her and her brothers. By asking if she can “keep” the lost boys, Wendy does not only hold onto the lost boys themselves, but she clings to Neverland’s sense of adventure and endless opportunities. She shares Peter Pan stories when she is grown, with the anticipation that the stories will continue to be passed down; she realizes that the imaginary world helped her grow, and she wants to share that with her own children. Unlike the first Wendy, she brings some of the impossible into the real world, which evidences the extent that Disney’s female roles have grown. Now, girls can not only live in the world; they can impact the world.

The New Alice

In 2010 Disney released its latest *Alice in Wonderland*, the most innovative of the four films. In this version, Alice disregards tradition in almost every way. She thinks ‘proper’ standards are ridiculous, and she tells her mother so at the outset of the story. Her mother expresses her desire for Alice to dress nicely, but Alice refuses to wear a corset and stockings. Then, the two attend a party where everyone expects Alice to become engaged to a stuffy man named Haymish. Alice doubts if she “want[s] to marry [him],” though everyone else is adamant that marrying him is the only plausible path for

her life. As Alice rides to the party with her mother and complains about what is and is not appropriate clothing, she questions the society's tradition as a whole by asking her mother, "who's to say what's proper?"

The new Alice is courageous. Far from crying a river, she faces her problems every step of the way. A Wonderland animal called a "bandersnatch" scratches Alice with its huge paw as it chases her; it leaves gashes on her upper arm. She calmly manages the pain of her wound, and she does not cower from the animal that inflicted it. Rather, she sits in a room alone with it and fearlessly reaches out to pull an important key from its neck. Unlike the first Alice, she does not break down when there is trouble; she thinks creatively about how to approach a solution instead. The new Alice exhibits the creative style of problem-solving that schools and companies are beginning to value (Eckhoff, et al 185; Madjar, et al. 730).

Rather than only being led, the new Alice leads. She leads the creatures of Wonderland when she stands up to fight the jabberwocky. She shows leadership when she plans and initiates action against the Red Queen. Alice demonstrates the esteemed qualities of taking initiative and "taking risks" (Madjar, et al.734). She takes others' advice, but she does not stand idly by the sidelines; she works to save the kingdom of Wonderland and everyone in it from the Red Queen. When the White Queen and the male characters approach Alice, she accepts her role as the White Queen's "champion," for the good of everyone. The White Queen tells Alice, "you cannot live your life to please others; the choice must be yours," and Alice shows incredible leadership when she bravely and selflessly chooses to help. Without her, the creatures of Wonderland would

be overtaken, but Alice steps up to her task. She definitely does not fit the mold of a damsel; she is the hero. Unlike Collins finds across media, Alice is not displayed by her “relationship[s];” no male character has to rescue and define her in the end (295). Her character proposes that women have more to offer than what movies have previously depicted. *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) presents women as valuable assets, rather than as helpless inconveniences.

It is surprising how opposite the two Alice characters are, despite visiting the same world. They have completely different reactions to it. Whereas the original Alice dislikes the disorder of Wonderland, the new Alice thrives in the impossible world. When Alice (2010) says, “this is impossible,” the Mad Hatter corrects her by adding, “only if you believe it is.” Through the story, Alice clings to her father’s notion of “believ[ing] six impossible things before breakfast.” She not only hopes for the impossible, like the original Alice and Wendy did; she acts to make it happen. She bravely slays the jabberwocky in Wonderland, and she declines Haymish’s marriage proposal and shares her plan for trade with China when she returns to the real world. She knows that she can accomplish more than people expect her to accomplish. She is confident in her abilities; Alice is a picture of the new Disney woman, who is capable. Alice’s adventures in Wonderland create a greater boldness in her; through her extraordinary experiences, she gains the ability to put her own creative ideas to work in the real world.

The Difference

In both newer movies, girls’ imagination is celebrated and spread, rather than frowned upon and restrained. The *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan* remakes use

visible actors instead of cartoons, which makes the films more realistic. The famous philosopher Plato is known for his thoughts about the concept of reality (Gould 20). He told a story about men in a cave looking at shadows; he used the story to say that some things are only 'shadows' of genuine reality (Gould 20-21). From Plato's perspective, imagination has a low degree of realism and is fundamentally separate from reality, but imagination does not have to remain in its own separate sphere; it can be carried into the real world.

In Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan*, there is a progression between the originals and the remakes that extends creative thinking from childhood into adulthood. Girls no longer have to leave the fairy tale worlds behind; they can bring imagination into their grown-up lives and defy convention. They are no longer constrained by traditional expectations of their futures; they have the freedom to explore and pursue their individual passions. The new Wendy and Alice display more resourceful qualities, which convey the idea of women that society is beginning to picture. The newer Disney fairy tales foster the concept of original, resourceful, creative girls. They support, rather than reject, female importance and originality. Disney's new fairy tales highlight the type of original, creative, and productive women that the world needs.

Identity

Films can have an incredible impact on audience's self-identity; they influence the way that viewers see themselves in the context of the world around them. Films can encourage or restrict viewers in their personal growth. In order for girls to grow and fulfill their potential, they need to be able to explore their interests, passions, and

abilities. They can do that by developing their imaginations. Disney's evolving female roles contribute to girls' creative development and support the concept of girls as creative thinkers. Disney's more recent films use imagination to support girls' development into innovative, valuable members of society.

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