

Power to the Pretty: An Analysis of the Relationship Between Gender Roles and
Power in Disney's Snow White

She hesitates for a second but alas she cannot resist. She is immediately drawn to the red, glossy apple the woman holds in her bony hands. She takes a bite. In this “fantasy-land,” not everything is picture perfect. Snow White lives in a world divided by those who wield beauty as a dangerous weapon and those who fall prey to its influence over their choices, actions, and ultimately, their fate. In Disney's pivotal film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the relationship between gender roles and power is illustrated through the importance placed on the feminine beauty ideal. Throughout the fairytale, the struggle to attain beauty becomes synonymous with the struggle to attain power. This inherent desire invariably leads to a rivalry between genders, as each gender asserts dominance over the other in order to gain self-esteem, social status, and acceptance.

From the very beginning, it is evident that beauty as a form of power plays a key role in the development of the story of Snow White. Beauty saves Snow White and leads to her happy ending yet, paradoxically; it is also what places her in danger and leads to her downfall. Beauty is also the cause of the evil Queen's misery as her envy of Snow White's beauty and influence grows and drives her into a murderous rage. The first scene shows an irritated Queen, furious that a girl more lovely and youthful than she has threatens her status. The jealous and vain Queen sits despairingly at her mirror on the wall. This image not only serves to illustrate the Queen's insecurities but also highlights the value attributed to her physical appearance, as it is viewed throughout the film as a

tool that women can use to their advantage. Ironically, the huntsman whom the Queen hires to stab Snow White is so enamored by her loveliness that he spares her life, demonstrating the authority women can hold over men if they are lucky enough to have good looks on their side.

Indeed, throughout her journey Snow White's most important asset is her appearance, as she easily charms the seven dwarfs into letting her live in their home. The relationship between Snow White and the seven dwarfs underscores the juxtaposition of their physical characteristics, social rankings, and gender roles. Almost immediately upon arriving at the dwarf's home Snow White adopts the role of the mother figure, cooking, cleaning, and teaching them the value of manners and cleanliness in the household. This seems fitting seeing as the dwarfs are the epitome of inferiority in terms of their ugly appearance, average occupations, and small stature. Snow White takes on a role of dominance here as she is clearly in a position of higher wealth, status, physicality, and power. This is also shown through the depiction of the dwarf's physical characteristics. In one scene, Dopey gets on Sneezy's shoulders in order to dance with Snow White, hiding the fact that he is standing on Sneezy's shoulders by dressing himself in a long coat. The fact that two men are needed in order to be a viable dance partner for Snow White along with the fact that this action had to be hidden by a coat, serves to highlight the extent to which the dwarfs are undesirable marriage partners for Snow White despite their kind and generous nature.

Nevertheless, despite Snow Whites efforts to use her beauty to gain acceptance and control, she is met with some opposition. Although, Snow White successfully plays the seven dwarfs to fall for her appeal and give in to her request, Grumpy is not as

impressed by her charm and is not as enthusiastic as the other dwarfs into welcoming her into their home. This is unacceptable for Snow White and she feels dissatisfied saying that she “wishes Grumpy would like [her].” The power struggle between the two genders becomes evident when it becomes apparent that Snow White must win Grumpy’s approval in order to feel content. Again, relying on her physical attributes and feminine appeal, she is effortlessly able to gain Grumpy’s affections with a simple kiss on the cheek. In a sense, her beauty is not only an advantage, but also a tool with which she impacts the thoughts and actions of those around her.

Additionally, the prince also controls the situation based on his knowledge of Snow White’s wants and desires as a feminine character. Along with the importance of beauty, the importance of marriage is also evoked through Snow White’s relentless determination to find her prince. Snow White yearns to find a “handsome, strong, prince” even going as far as singing that if she were to find him, he would be “so romantic, [she would] not resist.” This suggests the extent of her desire for acceptance and status, also allowing the prince to easily exploit Snow White’s naiveté makes vulnerable. All it takes is one kiss from the prince to sweep her off her feet. In no way is the prince shy about kissing Snow White as a dead corpse which suggests that he knows she is destined to fall in love with him.

Nevertheless, the power of ugly attributes is not to be underestimated in this fairytale. The Queen uses the disguise of an ugly, old hag to evoke sympathy from Snow White, as her ugliness seems to insinuate her poverty and frailty. Her ugliness also suggests that she is harmless and unthreatening.

Above all, it is the apple that makes the Queen's plan so seamless. Tempted by the apple's inviting appearance, Snow White chooses to trust the Queen and take a bite. Would she have done the same if the apple appeared to be dull and ordinary looking? Perhaps Snow White would have not been so foolish. The Queen of course knows this and cunningly uses the same power that helped Snow White along the way to destroy her as she falls to her impending death.

Although a seemingly elementary concept, beauty as a means through which power can be attained can be a complex one, creating a power struggle between genders as each gender confined within his or her stringent social roles uses superficial appearance as an instrument with which to advance in terms of influence and authority. The themes of beauty, wealth, status, and acceptance may not be new but they are hardly outdated. Even today women bat their eyelashes in order to woo the man of their dreams so that he can protect, admire, and provide for them. Power is congruous with happiness, and if beauty is a way to attain that happiness, that it is not only the basis for a fairytale but also the basis for which many people govern them-selves in society today. Media, television, and society as a whole consistently perpetuate the importance of superficial attributes through the display of celebrities, models, and photo-shopped images plastered everywhere for everyone to see. These messages can create a negative perception of the way one should behave in society and can be especially influential to children.

As a billion-dollar corporation, Disney holds a major influence over the images and messages shown to children as young as the age of five. Through its famous films featuring idealistic characters, Disney has become a powerful agent in the process of socialization. Although it is important to note and remember that *Snow White and the*

Seven Dwarfs was produced in 1937 and was perhaps socially correct for the time period, women should no longer be objectified to the point where beauty and sexual appeal is their only useful asset; one that can let them rise the ranks in society and achieve happiness and success. With its constant rebranding of the original Snow White film, Disney continues to evoke these themes that dictate the importance of beauty as a means of power, and more importantly, that there is a continuous power struggle between genders.

Furthermore, it is a myth that prettiness is synonymous with power and that power used in the form of manipulation is necessary for achieving the quintessential happy ending. Many young viewers of Disney films feel the pressure to lead a fairytale life, be stunningly beautiful, and meet their prince charming, yet even those who appear to have the perfect life often do not. Is being a princess overrated? Judging by the amount of Snow White's superficial encounters and dangerous situations it certainly seems to be. Is the price of being a princess too high? And what about the glory, prestige, and happy ending at the end of the storybook, what is that like? Does the princess feel satisfied and deserving of her happy ending when she reflects on what got her there? Maybe power as an extrinsic byproduct of superficiality, enticement, and bribery is just like Snow White's apple: red and juicy on the outside, but bitter and poisonous to the core.