

The Effect of Beauty and the Beast

Author: Hyewon Cho

Korea International School

Abstract

This paper discusses the impact of movie's subliminal messages on adolescent minds while analyzing the children's film, *Beauty and the Beast*. The paper is focused on criticizing the underlying sexist notions in *Beauty and the Beast* by outlining ways in which the film perpetuates gender stereotypes. Research on the psychological impact of gender stereotypes on adults is supported for the readers to understand the lasting impact in which gender stereotypes can make on children. Characters in the film that follow the gender stereotypes are examined: the Bimbettes, the Beast, Gaston, and Belle. The paper studies the roles in which these characters take part, and their exaggerated physical appearances that communicate sexist ideas towards the audience. The colors that these characters' are associated with are outlined, as the colors are arguably based on their gender. Furthermore, the harmful actions of the male protagonist, the Beast, towards the female protagonist, Belle, are thoroughly analyzed: the Beast's actions demonstrate emotional abuse, emotional manipulation, and emotional labor. Discussion of the apparent portrayal of Stockholm syndrome in the film is stated, which is emphasized to be harmful to children, especially girls. The paper criticizes Disney for romanticizing such abusive behaviors that may leave a lasting impact on children's minds.

The Effect of Beauty and the Beast

We live in a world that constantly bombards us with images and narratives which studies are starting to show, shaping our worldview. What was once seen as innocuous entertainment, various forms of media, especially movies, are being critically examined for how they inform the way we think, view, and feel about the world surrounding us. Research has been especially active in the field of child psychology, as parents are increasingly becoming aware of the possible issues that can arise from images influencing a child's sensibilities, particularly during their formative years (Binkley). Some movies encourage us to see the world through a different lens, and some allow us to feel emotions never felt before. Movies can change our personality without us even realizing, and leave lasting impressions on our minds. The impact of a movie can be substantial and should never be underestimated—especially when our minds and bodies are still developing. This underlying belief has framed the arguments laid out in this paper, a critical analysis of the universally celebrated children's film, *Beauty and the Beast*.

It is important for children's films to not communicate inappropriate meanings. Children tend to accept subliminal messages without any critical thinking as they lack the skills to do so due to their underdeveloped minds (Sternberg). As a result, many children's movies, including *Beauty and the Beast*, are created to teach a valuable lesson. However, most children's films tend to communicate unsuitable messages, unconsciously, through perpetuating gender stereotypes. *Beauty and the Beast* is one of the countless children's films that perpetuate gender stereotypes. Most viewers do not find gender stereotypes as a problem since society tends to normalize those stereotypes. Gender stereotypes range from pink being considered a 'girl color' to men having to be masculine to be considered a 'man'; therefore, stereotypes may seem impossible to influence and hurt young audiences. However, movies that contain gender stereotypes can impact a young audience's mindset and beliefs, even as adults. In a 2013 study, one-third of undergraduate women that had identified themselves as "princesses," set a higher value on physical attractiveness and were likely to say they wanted to marry than join the workforce (Coyne et al.). Many other studies also prove that gender-stereotypical movies/media can influence children's minds, ultimately affecting them as adults. Hence why Disney movies should be criticized by audiences by communicating sexist stereotypes towards children. *Beauty and the Beast* in its art form

perpetuate gender stereotypes in three ways: through physical appearance, gender-specific roles assigned to each character, and emotional labor.

A woman's worth

Of the many flaws in *Beauty and the Beast*, the emphasis the movie places on physical appearance is striking. Belle, the main character of this movie, is tasked with the responsibility of taking care of her father, Maurice. Belle's surroundings expect her to fit into the social norms of a woman which she rejects by reading books. Belle states that she has other aspirations like exploring the world, unlike many other women who end up becoming a wife. In one of the opening sequences of the movie, the townspeople are openly disapproving of Belle's intellect, and think she is wasting her beauty and youth - any endeavor that does not help her find a desirable husband is deemed unworthy and useless. The movie opens with a song, "Belle", introducing Belle and her village. The villagers sing about how beautiful Belle is but also state that her beauty is undermined by her "strange" (Woolverton) and "peculiar" (Woolverton) behaviors of reading books as a woman which makes her "different from the rest of us [villagers]". The song implies that Belle is pretty, but a smart woman, as if they are two qualities on the opposite sides of an arbitrary desirability spectrum. The movie presents a gender stereotype that women are objects that only have value when they adhere or conform to society's standards of beauty and gender roles. The movie's opening sequence is centered around Belle's beauty her name means "beautiful woman". However, Belle's physical characteristics are unrealistic: a thin waist that is as thin as her neck, unproportionately big eyes, among others. This portrayal sets an unhealthy bar for younger audiences. Disney has been criticized for its portrayal of female protagonists, as many of them have similar body shapes (Hatheway). Most female protagonists shown in Disney movies conform to a very specific beauty standard, therefore teaching a young and impressionable audience that beauty is the only valuable commodity they can offer society. Ironically, *Beauty and the Beast* intends to teach the perils of judging someone by his or her physical appearance, but misses the mark and produces the opposite effect.

In the opening song, "Belle", the Bimbette sisters, the town's resident beauties, swoon over Gaston because "[h]e's such a tall, dark, strong and handsome brute" (Woolverton). These are the traits that deem an individual masculine, which reinforce the societal stereotype that only masculine men are desirable and that men should aspire to be desired by women. The portrayal of the Bimbettes is similarly problematic. They are represented as traditional females, whose goal in life is to get married, as they are in love with Gaston despite his poor personality traits; the Bimbettes are caricature stereotypes of blonde girls: uneducated, feminine, and emotional (Heckert). The movie shows three blonde girls swooning over Gaston, while brunette Belle shows no interest in Gaston and rejects his proposal.

The modern stereotype of blonde and brunette girls can be traced back to a 1953 film called *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. In the film, Marilyn Monroe stars as Lorelei, who is blonde and is characterized as a dumb, clumsy woman, who is interested in marrying a man for his money. One of her famous lines is: "I can be smart when it's important, but most men don't like it". On the other hand, her co-star, Jane Russell, plays Dorothy who is a brunette and is characterized as a smart and independent woman (Morosini). The film portrayed brunette characters to be more academically inclined, in diametric opposition to their blonde counterparts who are vapid. This plays into society's toxic belief that a woman's personality depends on her hair color. *Beauty and the Beast* further feed the stereotype by assigning personalities to women by their hair color.

Lesson Learned

At the beginning of the movie, an old disheveled woman begs Prince Adam for shelter from the cold for the night at his castle. Prince Adam, intimidated by her unbecoming appearance, declines her request. Incensed by the poor treatment, the old woman transforms herself into a "beautiful Enchantress," (Woolverton) who curses Prince Adam to take the form of "a hideous beast," (Woolverton) stating that he has "no love in his heart" (Woolverton). His servants are also turned into objects. The Beast cannot un-cast the spell until someone falls in love with him, despite his monstrous appearance.

The Enchantress wants to teach the Prince a lesson about judging a person by one's character, not by one's physical appearance; therefore the Beast's appearance plays a key role in his punishment. The irony is not lost on the viewer, however, that the enchantress's form of punishment is also centered on looks. What was meant to be a taste of his own medicine, the Enchantress only deepens the Prince's prejudice against the macabre and the grotesque. The curse is a veiled attempt at teaching the perils of judging by physical appearance but fails spectacularly. Her brand of justice is retributive, focusing on punishment rather than rehabilitation (Walen). Proponents of retributive justice argue that victims have the right to punish the criminal (Locke). In principle, the Enchantress is not a victim of the Prince's "spoiled, selfish, and unkind" (Woolverton) personality, since she tricked the Prince on her own accord. How likely is it for someone to let a stranger into their home much less one with a "haggard appearance" (Woolverton)? When the Prince rejects her request as expected, the Enchantress concludes that he has "no love in his heart." (Woolverton) The creators of this film may have intentionally simplified the plotline to deliver a message for young audiences to easily understand. However, it is a message that instills fear of punishment in them, not shame.

What's worse, Belle, not Prince Adam, was the one who overcame the Beast's unsightly looks. Was this not a lesson meant to be learned by Prince Adam? Instead, the curse only taught Belle to look past the Beast's monstrous appearance and fall in love, resulting in the breaking of the curse and the Beast returning to his true form as Prince Adam. The lesson itself is misguided and does not achieve the intended effect. If appearance did not matter at all, there was no point in the Beast returning to his true form. The movie misinterprets punishment as a necessary lesson to the young audience of this movie. The curse and the lesson may have been more effective if Prince Adam was the one in Belle's place, where he has to love someone with an unappealing appearance. Disney's misguided attempt at teaching morals is rife with hypocrisy.

Gender-Color Symbolism

Throughout the movie, the characters are displayed in many different colors of clothing, making every scene vivid and come to life. However, a gendered pattern emerges, in accordance with the character's gender and color of clothing. Most male characters are displayed in stoic colors — navy, black, and crimson— and the color palette is limited. However, female characters are depicted in a variety of colors, such as green, blue, pink, red, yellow, among other vibrant hues. The choice to clothe male characters in dark colors and female characters in a wider range of colors is intentional and plays on preconceived notions of gender propriety. From an early age, society teaches children to associate colors with genders, even sometimes eliciting chromophobia: the fear of colors (Batchelor). This term had been around for centuries but David Batchelor, a Scottish artist, and writer connected chromophobia with gender stereotypes. Bright colors are perceived as queer, feminine, and primitive, diametrically opposing dark hues which are associated with notions of sophistication and maturity (Batchelor). As a society, we socially condition children to associate certain colors with boys/men, and other colors with girls/women. This conditioning is carried over into adulthood and perpetuated with gender stereotypes.

Sometimes subconsciously and at other times intentionally, we also discourage children from choosing colors that are not perceived as gender appropriate. Society would enforce the idea that bright varieties of colors are very unfitting to men as they represent feminine images, and that men are not supposed to be feminine. This eventually leads to most men often rejecting colors (colorful clothing). Belle is displayed in many different colors such as blue, yellow, red, and green. On the other hand, Beast is displayed in limited colors with only blue and dark red. Even the supporting characters have a designated set of colors for their clothing, depending on their gender. The male characters shown with Gaston are dressed in mostly brown colors, but the female characters, like the Bimbettes, are dressed in green, yellow, and pink. The pattern between color of clothing and gender is shown repeatedly, reinforcing the idea that men in society are chromophobe. This film is set in 17th century France, so one may argue that the gendered clothing colors may be due to the fashion during the period; where women dressed in many bright, saturated colored dresses while men had limited choice of colors for their suits: black, navy or brown. However, *Beauty and the Beast* is not a film that is reflective of the time period, so it is unreasonable to expect characters to be depicted in a way that accurately portrays the period in which their story is based. Colors assigned to the specific gender characters in the movie suggest that wearing bright colors

is considered appropriate for only female characters, therefore, any male depicted in "female" hues is essentially emasculated and rendered effeminate.

Manly men trope

Gaston is shortly introduced in the same opening act, talking to his sidekick Lefou. Gaston lives in the same town as Belle. He is portrayed as a masculine character with over-exaggerated chest hair, big muscles, and is tall in height compared to the rest of the male characters in the movie. LeFou's physical appearance is deliberately portrayed as completely antithetical to Gaston's: fat and short. LeFou and Gaston's physical appearances are in great contrast, with Gaston depicted to be superior to Lefou. Moreover, despite Gaston's mean and selfish personality and behavior shown throughout the movie, the people in town love Gaston regardless because he is "perfect" (Woolverton), reinforcing the belief that physical appearance matters more than personality. In the song "Gaston", the men in that bar sing about Gaston and compliments his manliness: "No one's slick as Gaston/..No one's neck's as incredibly thick as Gaston's/For there's no man in town half as manly/Perfect, a pure paragon!" (Woolverton). This states that being 'slick' and having a thick neck is what makes Gaston so manly (which is accepted as a desirable quality by default) and an attractive man. The song adds on by stating that manly men unlike Gaston are jealous because they are not as manly as he is, and that because he is masculine everyone loves him: "Every guy here'd love to be you, Gaston/Even when taking your lumps/There's no man in town as admired as you/You're everyone's favorite guy" (Woolverton). This generalization that every man in the town wants to become Gaston is highly problematic. Masculinity is envied and praised by 'non-masculine characters, demeaning individuals that are non-masculine.

Gender-specific roles

The prince's (Beast) servants are cursed and assigned to embody random objects that have no relation to who they are. Revealingly, female servants are transformed into objects that are considered to be part of the domestic domain, such as the teapot, feather duster, and wardrobe. Likewise, the male servants are transformed into objects that are perceived as stately, like the clock. Gender stereotypes are perpetuated by pairing male and female characters to their perceived male and female inanimate counterparts. . The movie plays on generalizations society makes about men and women and their roles.

Belle is represented as an independent woman who is not looking for love. She declines Gaston's advances and proclaims, "Can you imagine, he asked me to marry him...I want much more than this provincial life...I want adventure in the great wide somewhere" (Woolverton). The movie initially characterizes Belle as an independent woman who is not looking for love and instead wants to explore the world. This characterization of the main female character does not follow the standard damsel in distress trope, as do many Disney films — such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty* — where the primary objective of the female protagonist is to fall in love with a man. This alone prompts some viewers and critics to conclude that *Beauty and the Beast* is a feminist movie. However, despite Belle's strong sense of self and independent streak, Belle ends up falling in love with the Prince and eventually becomes his wife. This is quite the deviation from Belle's original objective in life, where she wanted "much more than this provincial life" (Woolverton). The fact that her "adventure in the great wide somewhere" (Woolverton) amounted to marrying a Prince is extremely disappointing. Belle, a once ambitious and free-thinking maverick, eventually succumbs to social expectations and norms. It begs the question: was there no other possible storyline that could have had Belle reach personal fulfillment without a man's validation? The movie only furthers the notion to a young and impressionable audience that no matter the differences in personalities, women will end up depending on men, which is their only path to a "happily ever after" (Woolverton).

Throughout the movie, Belle is portrayed as a loving caretaker. Belle's natural disposition to care for and support those around her is weaponized against her, deployed as a device for the Beast and Belle to fall in love. At one point, Belle attempts to escape the castle but her plans are thwarted when she gets chased by wolves. The Beast comes to her rescue and saves Belle. Upon their return to the castle, which is still the site of Belle's imprisonment, Belle finds that the Beast took a hard hit in his duel with the wolves, so Belle is tasked

with the bandaging of his open wounds. This transitional scene marks the first signs of romantic interest from both Belle and the Beast, where they are both vulnerable (Belle in a failed escape, the Beast in a weakened state). This deeply intimate moment plays on society's gender expectations on what is deemed appropriate behavior for men and women. Why should Belle, who had a critical chance to escape her captor, feel compelled to aid him? As a caretaker, Belle is burdened with the emotional labor of nursing those around her back to health, no matter her cost.

. Biologically speaking, females embodying nurturing traits is advantageous for the larger social group; males, on the other hand, were given the responsibility to protect the mother and the child from enemies, predators, and other harms (Jestice). In modern society, it is unnecessary for women to still take on caretaking roles since fitness is not essential in modern society. Caretaking should not be a gendered trait as both males and females can embody them. However, many movies (including *Beauty and the Beast*) impose nurturing characteristics on female characters, where they are expected to take care of male characters, both physically and emotionally. For example, it's not out of the ordinary to see female characters tending to men's injuries after a fight, and shoulder their emotional baggage. To this day, in many studio films, female characters have been relegated to support roles in order for male characters to develop throughout the plot. Although the protagonist, Belle is also assigned this cliché role of helper and supporter to a male lead (Prince Adam or the Beast).

As stated above, many critics hold *Beauty and the Beast* in high regard as a feminist movie. However, this movie is just like any other sexist movie that assigns gendered roles according to society's expectations. The film manipulates young audiences into thinking that the movie is encouraging women's equality when in reality, it does the opposite by assigning the characters' roles according to gender.

Emotional Labor

Throughout the film, Belle endures many types of emotional labor such as emotional manipulation. According to American writer Arlie Russell Hochschild, emotional labor is when an individual is expected to manipulate his/or her feelings in a workplace— into the expected emotion — to satisfy customers, co-workers, and superiors (Hochschild). However, the writer posits that emotional labor is not always confined to the workplace, as the definition can expand to other circumstances, where an individual has to manage his/her emotions.

Emotional Manipulation

Belle's father is captured in the Beast's castle due to his alleged attempts of stealing the Beast's property. Belle goes to the castle to rescue her father but instead offers to be imprisoned in exchange for her father's freedom. Lumiere, the three-armed candelabra, says to Cogsworth, the enchanted clock, "Don't you see... she's the one we've been waiting for for. She has come to break the spell" (Woolverton) and proceeds to free Belle from jail and guide her to a bedroom in the castle. The only reason why the objects are so friendly towards Belle is that they believe that Belle is their only chance for the Beast to fall in love, reverse the curse, and turn themselves back into humans. Throughout the rest of the film, the objects pressure her and the Beast to fall in love, as Lumiere states to the Beast, "You fall in love with her, she falls in love with you, and--Poof!--the spell is broken! We'll be human again by midnight!"(Woolverton). The supporting characters manipulate Belle because their lives depend on Belle to save them from forever being cursed.

Belle is frightened by the Beast's uncontrolled anger and violent bursts which include throwing furniture, hitting the wall, and yelling at Belle. For example, the Beast threatens Belle by stating "Fine! Then go ahead and STARVE!!!! (To OBJECTS) If she doesn't eat with me, then she doesn't eat at all!" (Woolverton), just because he couldn't take a "No, thank you," (Woolverton) as Belle's response to join him for dinner. However, the objects encourage her to befriend the abuser (Beast) as Madame de la Grande Bouche, also known as the Wardrobe nudges Belle, "Why don't you give him a chance?"(Woolverton), even though they are just as scared of the Beast. The movie essentially creates characters who prey on Belle's kind personality, as she is encouraged to suppress any feelings of reservation and fear harbored towards the Beast. This is precisely the

problematic narrative we feed young girls today, who grow up feeling they need to repress their emotions in order to keep others happy and comfortable, even at their own expense.

Emotional abuse

The Beast and Belle struggle at first to start a relationship due to their differences in personalities. The Beast has trouble opening up to Belle with sensibility, and instead directs all of his emotions into angry outbursts. Belle is fearful of the Beast's brutal actions and therefore rejects his offer to eat dinner together. Belle is sad and frightened as she states: "I've lost my father, my dreams, everything" (Woolverton), clearly signaling that she does not want to have dinner with the person who took all of that away. However, the objects try to make light of the situation, and reply, "Why the master's not so bad once you get to know him. Why don't you give him a chance?" (Woolverton). The objects are telling Belle to trust a stranger who is keeping her captive and being abusive towards her, because supposedly, under all of that monstrous appearance he happens to be a good person. Belle is reluctant but ultimately accedes to their demands. This scene shows what supporting abusive relationships can look like. Abusive relationships occur when the individual is abusing his or her partner mentally, emotionally, or physically. The Beast's change in behavior and his transformation from a hideous monster to a handsome prince suggest that giving consistent love and care can change their partner's abusive behaviors. The message communicates that victims should be able to look past the "beast" and provide emotional support until their partner becomes a beautiful "prince."

Many abusive relationships can end in a situation where the victim decides to stay in the relationship, even though they are being abused. One reason may be because abusers will often apologize or show intimacy after their violent outbursts, with the victim justifying the abuse by thinking the love outweighs the violence. The Beast has shown abusive actions towards Belle, which upset her. Afterward, the objects advise the Beast to show Belle his library to win her heart. Belle is happy about all the books, and so the Beast gifts his library to her. Then Belle proceeds to open up to the Beast: "There's something sweet/And almost kind/But he was mean/And he was coarse and unrefined./But now he's dear/...I wonder why I didn't see it there before" (Woolverton). The Beast gained Belle's trust and love by taking advantage of her love for books and gifted her a library. How many stories do we hear of abusers showering their victims with gifts in an attempt to minimize their heinous actions?

This implies to the audience that gifting valuable objects is an acceptable form of apology, even though the Beast has never directly apologized to Belle. Nonetheless, Belle takes the bait. Frequently, the victims don't recognize that they were experiencing an abusive relationship because it is hard to believe that a person that behaves caring, intimate, and loving towards them is abusing them. The film romanticizes abusive relationships by presenting the manipulative behaviors of Beast in a romantic way which allows for (especially young) audiences to normalize manipulative relationships. Many films other than *The Beauty and the Beast* also tend to romanticize unhealthy behaviors teaching the viewers that abusive behaviors are just a way for a person to show love and intimacy.

Stockholm Syndrome

When Belle was escaping the castle, she was saved by the Beast from a wolf who was about to pounce on her; he heroically risked his life and saved her from a dire fate. However, the Beast only reclaims Belle hostage. The Beast's action of saving Belle from the wolves may be justified to heroically portray the Beast, however, the movie romanticizing the action of Belle, the victim, taking care of her abuser should not be allowed. Later on, Belle and the Beast establish a romantic interest towards each other even though the Beast is holding Belle captive, and the movie concludes with Belle and the Beast married. This is a psychological phenomenon called Stockholm Syndrome, where victims emphasize or gain romantic interest towards their kidnapper/abuser (Bejerot). The victims decide to be kind and affectionate towards their captors in the hopes to prevent or minimize the chances of being abused when they feel any type of physical or mental danger from their captors. In other words, they try to emotionally please and manipulate their abuser in order to avoid abuse. This decision may not be a conscious decision for the victims as it is human instinct to want to feel safe.

However, this manipulation may lead to the victims viewing their abuser in a positive light and ultimately believing they are truly in love with their abuser. While Belle volunteered to be held captive, it was in exchange for her father's freedom. This does not take away from the fact that she is indeed a victim and an abductee.

Furthermore, there may be a gendered aspect to Stockholm Syndrome: women are often the victims of Stockholm Syndrome. This may be due to the glorification of abusive men in the media, as countless movies portray abusive men as sexy and romantic. Women have been socialized to view abuse from men as an interest; whether the causal link exists or not, it is the women who fall in love with their kidnapper/abuser. The movies that romanticize kidnappings can be misinterpreted by women, especially girls, about these serious situations. Feeding girls imagery and storylines where abusive predators and kidnappers may not be so terrible, as they wait for their "happily ever after" (Woolverton), just like Belle, is problematic, to say the least. Belle started scared of the Beast's abusive actions but after winning the Beast over with kindness, her monstrous abuser turned into a beautiful prince. Girls may believe that the abuse or harassment that they received from men is normal and a way for men to display romantic interest, therefore one reason why the victims may fail to realize that they are the victim. Moreover, due to this normalization, many women who have experienced harassment or abuse may not likely report or speak up about it because society, in general, does not acknowledge the seriousness of it.

Alarming, this is a narrative arc that emerges in many romance movies, where male characters will emotionally abuse the female character, but she will eventually fall in love regardless. Whether it is stalking, verbal or physical harassment, the female character shows disinterest in the beginning but the male character would constantly harass them until she falls in love; just like Beauty and the Beast. They communicate a misguided message to men and boys into making them believe that these awful behaviors are going to help them "get the girl". Furthermore, abusive male characters are viewed as masculine and attractive, which implants a notion in men that abusing women makes them more attractive. A strapping and charismatic male can get away with almost anything; in fact, their portrayal in the media is directly connected to society's romanticization of abuse.

Movies shape our worldview, especially in our childhood. Disney, one of the biggest media companies in the world, has played a pivotal role in the upbringing of many children throughout the world. Therefore, Disney has a moral responsibility to make movies that account for their immense cultural, social, and global influence. The movie Beauty and the Beast misses the mark on many fronts. Like many others in the Disney catalog, it supports numerous gendered stereotypes by assigning characters color clothing based on their gender, roles according to their gender, and females' self-worth to males. Disturbingly, the film glorifies abuse, both emotional and physical, by repackaging abuse as a romantic fairytale. Even worse, the movie fails to deliver the moral of the story— to value personality over appearances— and instead achieves the opposite. The movie only helps to further normalize gendered stereotypes and abuse. Disney has recently released a live-action version of Beauty and the Beast, starring feminist icon, Emma Watson as Belle. While it was hoped that the 1991 animation's problematic storyline had improved, the 2017 Beauty and the Beast failed to address any of the original's gaffes and perpetuated gender disparity and the romanticization of abuse. However, Disney should be recognized for slowly making improvements on their end, creating independent princess characters such as Merida from Brave, Moana from Moana, and Elsa from Frozen. They revolve around storylines where the female protagonist pursues her dreams and goals, without a love interest. Dare we remain cautiously optimistic that Disney will one day break all gender barriers? Only time will tell, but we seem to be moving in the right direction.

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