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Media portrayal of Gender Stereotypes in the
1950s: Walt Disney's *Cinderella* and *Sleeping
Beauty*

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ABSTRACT

The 1950s was a decade of change. The ending of World War II gave our nation a focus on the importance of family and community. However, the constant fear of a nuclear war left people feeling that life was too short to take for granted. This led many women to give up their lives in the workplace and take up living in the home to care for their families. Not all women chose to follow this homemaker lifestyle, but the majority of magazines, newspapers, movies, and other media directed its attention only towards the women who did work inside the home. This made it seem as though the women who were employed were not good mothers or wives. This media advertisement gave the impression that all women were stay-at-home moms who needed good husbands to provide for them as well as the newest technology to make their home the best on the block. Even children's books and movies at the time showed young girls the idea that they needed to find themselves a hard working, stable man to provide and take care of them instead of being able to care for themselves. Walt Disney, not wanting to miss out on this marketing campaign, reinforced these gender roles and stereotypes within his versions of *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

I. Introduction

One of America's favorite decades to remember is the 1950s. It was a decade of which many are nostalgic about because of the increase in industry, technologies, prosperity, and not to mention the baby boom. Because of these changes, there was no longer need for middle and upper class women to work outside the home. After the end of World War II there were able-bodied men to fill the gaps where women had worked during the war. This meant women were now free to choose their own occupations and work wherever they wanted. Instead of becoming CEOs and business owners, however, it became more acceptable and almost required for women to stay at home and become wives and mothers. The media did its best to reinforce these new standards. Magazines, movies, and newspapers portrayed women as diligent servants to their husbands. The advertisements made showed new technologies such as the automatic dishwasher or a new vacuum modeled by women wearing high heels and pearls.

In reality, many women did choose a life of employment as well as a family. The media portrayal of these women workers was rare. Working women were atypical of the "norm" during this decade. Society and media glorified the newfound stereotypes of women who did live at home making it seem like if a woman did not stay at home she was abandoning her husband and her children.

There were four main depictions of women at this time. First, some women were successfully confined to their domestic lifestyles by the media. Others expressed their independence through working and lived under the radar of media attention. Still others

uttered their discontent over their confinement in the home environment. The final collection of women during this decade was the few women who were truly happy with being house wives. The combination of these four categories gave society the real women of the 1950s.¹

There were many different examples of all of these categories throughout the decade. However, sources about working women were extremely difficult to find. Most of the occupational women stayed out of the media and therefore, American's today possess a skewed vision of the real, middle-class woman who lived at this time. People believe that the media's portrayal of the housewife during the 1950s was an accurate representation of how life really was. There was little primary evidence to support the notions that there was more to women than cooking, cleaning, and caring for their families.

The 1950s stereotypes about women and gender roles had a major impact on the perceptions of people throughout the United States and because of its rising popularity and demand, the Walt Disney Corporation ran with these stereotypes. Disney released depictions of two famous fairy tales, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*, which supported and affirmed these generalizations about women during this time period.

¹ Comments from Professor Robert Gough on March 31st, 2009.

II. Background

Golden hues of nostalgia have helped create a whitewashed, almost mythical pop culture portrayal of the 1950s as a “Leave it to Beaver” or “Father Knows Best” time of innocence and domestic tranquility. According to the legend, this is a time when the majority of American’s “liked Ike” believed what they read in their newspapers, worked hard to live in a big house with a white picket fence, and lived carefree “Happy Days” and “Wonder Years.”²

--Brian Thornton

The 1950s proved to be a very controversial time period and not the “Happy Days” that people usually remember. America, along with the rest of the world, as stated above, was recovering from World War II. People began to see a new and exciting future shining brightly ahead. The position of women was changing drastically from years before. Women stepped up and began to show their interest in society, economics, politics, and environmental issues. However, many women chose to leave their positions in the workplace and settle down to a quiet life at home. Some women began families and committed themselves to lives outside of the working environment. This new found ability to choose whether to work, or not to work, was part of the changing dynamics of women during this time. Hobbies and interests outside of the home were becoming popular. Movies, music, books, and magazines also changed to conform to the modern woman.

According to William and Nancy Young, the 1950s was a decade of change and development. New ideas and technologies were taking precedence over the traditions of the past. Radio, television, newer faster cars, and rock 'n' roll influenced the youth of the

² Brian Thornton. “Subterranean Days of Rage: How Magazine Letters to the Editor in 1952 Foretold a Generation of Revolution,” *American Journalism* 24(2007):59-88

nation. Betty Crocker, Dick Clark, and Elvis Presley became household names. However, there was also room for Senator McCarthy, Blacklisting, and the constant threat of invasion or nuclear war.³ Do-it-yourself fallout shelters were almost as common as home radios and televisions during the 50s.⁴ Even though people were afraid of potential threats and violence, they found a way to enjoy life as well.

Media, film, and magazines boomed throughout this decade. In 1950, “sixty million Americans [went] to the movies each week.”⁵ They watched movies like *The Quiet Man*, starring John Wayne or *Casablanca*, with Humphrey Bogart, and entertained by television sitcoms such as, *I Love Lucy*. The media gave society something to look forward to or something to strive to become. They emphasized the notion that every family in America was supposed to be the “perfect family” like the Cleavers on *Leave it to Beaver*. Advertising took on a whole new role in both the radio and television markets. Women were subjected to ideas for “necessary” appliances and household gadgets. New items were introduced every day and it was hard for the average middle-class family to “keep up with the Jones’.” All of these new things brought about serious changes to society during the 1950s. Women were hit especially hard with tons of media attention focused directly at them. Because of this media intensity, many women found new products and technologies to be irresistible and therefore exceptionally easy to become fixated upon.

Within the commercials and advertisements for these new products, the subliminal

³ William and Nancy Young, *The 1950s: American Popular Culture Through History* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004).

⁴ William and Nancy Young, *The 1950s: American Popular Culture Through History* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004).

⁵ William and Nancy Young, *The 1950s: American Popular Culture Through History* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004).

messages of needing to look good, dressing in the latest fashions, and being “company ready” at all times were thrust upon middle-class women. Some women decided they were required to dress, speak, and act like the women they saw everyday on television, the radio, or read about in newspapers and magazines. New stereotypes and gender roles were fixed and society conformed to them almost immediately. Not only the adult females of society were subjected to these falsities either; young girls were receiving these messages in the movies and television which they were exposed to on a daily basis. Even Walt Disney added his fair share of the 1950s stereotypical women into the roles of two of our most beloved fairy tales of all time, *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

III. Historiography

Books, journals, and many other sources were published about the 1950s because it is one of America's favorite decades to remember. Many sources specify gender stereotypes, but few explain why these stereotypes may not have been completely true. Few sources provided examples of women who did not fit into the gender stereotypes. Books such as *The American Woman* by William H. Chafe,⁶ *The Fifties: the Way We Really Were* by Douglas T. Miller,⁷ or *Not June Cleaver* by Joanne Meyerowitz⁸ served as great overviews on what the fifties were really like, but there were almost no prime examples of actual women who defied these stereotypes.

Consequently, the books, journals, and other sources fit into four different categories. First there were the sources that described women's roles in society; second, came the sources with general information about the 1950s; third, came the sources with specific examples of media stereotypes. Finally sources about the life and works of Walt Disney and his corporation, and others dealing with Disney's films were categorized.

A Woman's Place by Ruth Adam⁹ described women's roles in society and in the home. This book interpreted what women did, how they behaved, and where their place in society stood. Adam did give some details about some women who chose to work alongside their husbands instead of raising a family; however, there were no specific

⁶ William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Political, Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

⁷ Douglas T. Miller, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*. (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1977).

⁸ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver; Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

⁹ Ruth Adam, *A Woman's Place 1910-1975*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company INC., 1975).

cases of actual women mentioned. *The Progressive Housewife* by Sylvie Murray¹⁰ was much the same. It seemed as though these books explained everything but the lives of individual women who disproved these stereotypes.

The Fifties: a Woman's Oral History by Brett Harvey¹¹ was also about women's roles during the 1950s. Unlike the first sources, however, Harvey was the only one to use actual women for his book. Harvey delved deep into the domestic, political, social, and economic role of women throughout the decade. He collected decades of oral histories from ninety-two women of all ages in all social classes. These women shared their stories and their memories in his useful book. Harvey stated in the introduction that Americans look back upon the fifties with fondness and nostalgia because it was a great time to live. "Americans have a kind of fondness for the fifties. We think of it as a jokey, cartoonish decade, full of too-bright colors, goofy space-age designs, outlandish people and events, extreme ideas. We collect streamlined appliances, big-finned cars, poodle skirts, and Hula Hoops as artifacts from an exotic and slightly ridiculous era."¹² Harvey described the fifties as a decade when women went back inside the home and forgetting the progress they had made in the 1930s and 1940s:

The image of single women as incomplete and deficient human beings was everywhere in the culture. The jaunty, self-possessed career gals of the films of the thirties and forties had given way in the fifties to unflattering portraits of single women as pitiable and slightly ridiculous...Most of the women I interviewed for this book would probably have married in any case. A few of them, in a different era, might have chosen not to marry. But in the 1950s there was nothing around to indicate that a single life could be anything other than lonely, empty, and joyless.¹³

¹⁰ Sylvie Murray, *The Progressive Housewife*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

¹¹ Brett Harvey, *The Fifties; a Woman's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1983).

¹² Brett Harvey, *The Fifties; a Woman's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1983).

¹³ Brett Harvey, *The Fifties; a Woman's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1983).

Harvey's women were all a part of the mass movement to become women who married, started families, and supposedly led contented lives as homemakers and trophy wives. Many of Harvey's women were actually unhappy with their lifestyles, and when interviewed, said they would have chosen to live their lives differently if given a second chance. This book was filled with many first-hand accounts of life in the fifties. Each of Harvey's women had an interesting story which most often went against the stereotypes of the decade.

Many of the women in Harvey's book told about how much of an influence the media had on them and their households. Media of the 1950s played a major role in creating and designing the societal stereotypes. Women who did spend their time at home were influenced by television, radio, and reading material. Stereotypes were given to them by the hour.

Women's roles in the 1950s were further illuminated by general overview sources. These sources were quick to judge the decade and feed off of the stereotypes with fervor. *The 1950s: American Popular Culture Through History* by William and Nancy Young¹⁴ was one of these books. It generalized the feelings and opinions of the 1950s without going into huge detail about anything. This method served as a good overview and valid background information on the 1950s but did nothing for supporting women who were not part of the stereotypical world set up during this time. Douglas Miller's and Joanne Meyerowitz's books possessed informative synopses and overviews of the 1950s as a decade, but did little to express the opinions and views of actual people.

¹⁴ William and Nancy Young, *The 1950s: American Popular Culture Through History*. (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004).

Nancy A. Walker had a different idea of how to present material about the 1950s. Her books were about various newspaper, magazine, and journal articles which pointed out the major stereotypes of this decade. She put together several articles in her book *Women's Magazines 1940-1960*¹⁵ that showed what the standards for women were. This paperback was full of advertisements and articles from magazines, newspapers, and journals of the 1950s. These articles were what women of the time read and lived by, very much like *Cosmopolitan* or *People Magazine* of today's world. Then again, some of the collected magazines are still in publication, such as *Good Housekeeping*, *Redbook*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*. These magazines taught women how to dress, how to act, what to eat, what to buy, and all other basic feminine wants and needs. Some of the article titles were as follows, "You Can't Have a Career and Be a Good Wife,"¹⁶ "Are You Too Educated to Be a Mother?"¹⁷ Others stated frankly, "Housekeeping Need Not Be Dull,"¹⁸ "Occupation—Housewife,"¹⁹ and finally, "How to Look Halfway Decent."²⁰

Walker provided information in the form of articles, advertisements, and background material in her book. She compiled all of these magazine articles into a great collection that contained insight into the daily lives of many 1950s women. These articles varied in content and purpose, but all were interesting and valid. Some articles would be thought of as ridiculous and downright horrifying by today's standards, but they were very informative when studying this decade of nostalgia. Walker's other book, *Shaping*

¹⁵ Nancy A. Walker, *Women's Magazines 1940-1960; Gender Roles and The Popular Press*. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998).

¹⁶ Nancy A. Walker, 71, *Ladies' Home Journal*, January 1944.

¹⁷ Nancy A. Walker, 114, *Ladies' Home Journal*, June 1946.

¹⁸ Nancy A. Walker, 149, *Ladies' Home Journal*, October 1941.

¹⁹ Nancy A. Walker, 161, *Ladies' Home Journal*, March 1949.

²⁰ Nancy A. Walker, 225, *McCall's*, February 1959.

Our Mother's World: American Women's Magazines,²¹ shared more of her opinion than simply giving the magazine articles. She explored many examples from the *Ladies' Home Journal* and other women's magazines from the time like the first Walker book; but, this one stated her opinions and thoughts about these magazine articles.

Walker emphasized the impact that the media had on women at the time. These pictures and advertisements were everywhere. Not only were the images and stories given to the women of the household, but also to the young children these women were raising as well. The Walt Disney Corporation, being a family company, wanted to stay in the mainstream and therefore, reinforced these stereotypes in their children's movies and stories.

The final category deals with sources contributing to the understanding of Walt Disney and his role promoting 1950s gender stereotypes. Disney's versions of *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* were created to show women and their daughters during this era how to become like the stereotypical model of a perfect woman. *Cinderella* was presented to America in 1950 and *Sleeping Beauty* just nine years later in 1959. Originally these two fairy tales were created by European peasants and told to other peasants for entertainment purposes. They were used to identify the morals, culture, traditions and values of the people at this time. Stories like these also showed people of the past that it took supernatural events to rise above the social status to which they were born. They most often ended with a moral or value that fit in with the social norms. Walt Disney had to adapt these stories so that his films fit into the new theme of the 1950s, He showed

²¹ Nancy A. Walker, *Shaping Our Mother's World: American Women's Magazines*. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

women how important it was to be the “perfect” wife, mother, or homemaker.

However, in order to understand Disney’s films, one must first understand the man himself. Bob Thomas wrote, *Walt Disney: an American Original*²² a biography of the life and times of our beloved treasure, Walt Disney. In his book, Thomas divided Disney’s life into a couple of different sections. The area of his book that held the most applicable information was chapter four entitled, “Stretching the Horizon, 1945-1961.”²³ Thomas described the process of how the film *Cinderella* came about. According to Thomas, the making of *Cinderella* took several years:

Three classics had been in development for several years- *Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Cinderella*. Walt did not feel comfortable with either *Peter Pan* or *Alice*, finding the characters too cold. *Cinderella* on the other hand, possessed the qualities of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and he chose to go ahead with it. Walt assigned all of his top talent to the production...Walt attended every story meeting contributing his usual flood of ideas.²⁴

Likewise, Thomas was able to get the inside scoop on Walt Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty*.

First released in 1959, Disney kept fairly busy with other major projects including “Disneyland, television, and the live action films.”²⁵ Thomas stated, “He kept his eye on the cartoon’s progress, but he lacked time to lavish on its preparation, as he had done on all the previous features. As a result, the characters lacked the human touches that Walt always endowed; they also lacked his humor.”²⁶ This source is not only extremely relevant because of its inside access into the mind of Walt Disney, but also because Bob Thomas interviewed witnesses who were inside those meetings with Disney during the making of

²² Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: an American Original*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).

²³ Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: an American Original*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).

²⁴ Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: an American Original*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).

²⁵ Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: an American Original*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).

²⁶ Bob, Thomas, *Walt Disney: an American Original*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).

many films. Disney spent time with every one of his films because he wanted to make them successful and ensure their appeal to average women and children of the 1950s. Though the book was somewhat biased through the viewpoint of eye-witness Bob Thomas, it provided a lot of background information on Disney's life.

Harvey, Thomas, Walker, and Young all provided useful and valid information on this subject. Although only Harvey's gave specific examples of real women during this time, they all aided in understanding more about stereotypes from the 1950s. Thomas and others like him showed how Walt Disney changed the original fairy tales of *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* to enforce the stereotypes and to attract the interest of women and children during this time. His tales derived from Perrault's and Grimm's original versions, but he added his own personal twist. He focused on adapting them to the "modern" lifestyle. Disney's main objective was to sell movie tickets during the 1950s. The public expected films to which they could relate. Because of this, his characters needed to follow societal roles and stereotypes closely. He made them behave as though they were the "perfect women" for society.

IV. Women's Stereotypes

The media image of the American woman had her staying at home and raising a family. Widely accepted in the popular mind, this comforting and stereotypical picture got challenged in real life as the fifties moved along. Also, while numerous television shows featured stay-at-home moms in their plots, large-circulation magazines countered with articles that extolled the extra earning power of a second income.²⁷

-William and Nancy Young

The media in the 1950s portrayed the average middle-class family as the perfect household. Men went off to work every morning to provide for their families while the wives would stay home and cook, clean, and take care of the children. Not only was the wife always in a dress and high heels, but she was also in a constant state of happiness. There was no stress or fighting in the home. Television sitcoms like *Father Knows Best* maintained this stereotype, allowing Margaret to behave as the perfect wife, doting on her family's every whim.

Advertisements in newspapers and magazines made it seem like women were the queens of domesticity to the point of having some of their models wear crowns or tiaras.

It mattered little that many American women chose employment and careers over homemaking; the image perpetuated throughout the 1950s was one of inequality: a woman's role consisted of making her family happy by serving them, providing them all the best consumer goods, and then taking her pleasure in their happiness.²⁸

In reality, many women decided to have full-time jobs and raise a family. The media portrayed one constant image while completely ignoring those women who were giving support to their family alongside of their husbands.

²⁷ William and Nancy Young, *The 1950s; American Popular Culture Through History*, (Connecticut; Greenwood Press, 2004).

²⁸ William and Nancy Young, *The 1950s; American Popular Culture Through History*, (Connecticut; Greenwood Press, 2004).

Public thought was that some women who decided to stay home after World War II because they were frightened by a potential nuclear war with the Soviet Union. This Cold War, as it became known, was indeed a threat to the lives of United States citizens, but it was not a part of the everyday routine and most were fortunate enough to be able to adapt to stressful circumstances of the times. Douglas Miller and Marion Nowak pointed out that the gloriousness of domesticity in the fifties might not have happened if it was not for the way World War II ended. Because of the atom bombs dropped on Japan, the arms race with the Soviet Union, and the communist witch hunts, Americans were worried about what the future held.²⁹ According to Joanne Meyerowitz:

Scholars are correct in pointing to America's obsession with family life and traditional gender roles in the postwar period, and they have demonstrated how the Cold War contributed to that obsession by linking women's traditional roles to national security. But the international crisis also encouraged leaders to look toward women's employment as an important element in the nation's readiness to meet that crisis. As the actual behavior of women increasingly deviated from the celebration of domesticity, [various groups] promoted the view that the expansion of nontraditional roles for women was compatible with the nation interest.³⁰

People were quick to assume that the reason why women chose to stay at home instead of helping their husbands earn an income was because they were afraid of what could happen in the future. While truth could be found in part of this argument, there were still select women who desired a career and a future in employment opportunities.

Though there were many women who did choose a life in the home, other women wanted to better themselves by attending colleges, getting jobs, and making themselves a name in the business world. The Saturday Evening Post ran several articles about

²⁹ Douglass Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, (New York; Doubleday and Company INC. 1977), 152.

³⁰ Joanne Meyerowitz, *Not June Cleaver; Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, (Pennsylvania; Temple University Press, 1994), 97-98.

women in the workplace. One article entitled, *Danger: Boss Lady At Work*, was about Olive Ann Beech, then Olive Mellor, the only woman chief executive in the aircraft industry to run an \$89,000,000-a-year business.³¹ When she first applied in 1925, her boss told her that she had nice legs and was “just fine” for the position. Later, she married her boss, the President of the Corporation. She worked her way up through the years and eventually ended up as President and Director of Beech Aircraft Corporation after her husband died. “By conservative estimate she is personally worth \$7,000,000, perhaps considerably more. She earns around \$100,000 a year and employs some 6000 workers, who this year will turn out about \$89,000,000 worth of planes and parts.”³² Olive Beech was not the stereotypical middle-class housewife of the 1950s. She was not the only woman of her kind.

Another incredible, independent woman gained respect in society when she wrote a letter to the editor of a popular journal called, *Marriage and Family Living* in May of 1957. Myrtle Mann Gillet read an article in this journal she did not agree with. She expressed her opinions in a very well written and expressive letter which proved women were capable of being educated and having the same knowledge men possessed. The editor of the journal was so impressed with her eloquence and dignity in communicating her thoughts that he wrote back to her and congratulated her talents.³³ Because women were inclined to get married right after high school and staying home to raise children, it was often assumed that they were incapable of having intelligence or able to receive an education.

³¹ Saturday Evening Post. August 8th, 1959. 26-27, 35.

³² Saturday Evening Post. August 8th, 1959. 26.

³³ Myrtle Mann Gillet, “Letters to the Editor, “*Marriage and Family Living*, vol.19(2). May 1957.

Many women like Mrs. Beech and Mrs. Gillet who proved the uneducated women stereotype to be untrue. The 1950s were filled with women who were great successes. Anna Rosenberg became President Truman's Secretary of Defense in 1950. Many strong and independent women served in the United States army, not all as nurses, some were Marine Reserves and others pilots. Marion Donovan invented the disposable diaper in 1951, making caring for young children much easier. Dr. Florence Sibert discovered a working skin test for finding tuberculosis in 1952. 1953 brought, Jacqueline Cochran, the first woman to break the sound barrier for the air force, and NBC's first serious woman reporter, Pauline Friedrich. In 1954, Ellen A. Peters graduated Yale Law School as a front runner in her class. No law firm would offer her a job, so took a job as a teacher and later became Yale's first tenured female professor.³⁴

Other influential woman included, Esther Friedman Lederer, otherwise known as, "Ann Landers," began to write for the *Chicago Sun Times* in 1955. Then a month later, her twin sister, Pauline Friedman Phillip started "Dear Abby" for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. 1956 gave us Bette Graham who made a fortune on her invention, Liquid Paper, and Bette Friedan in 1957 who later published, *The Feminine Mystique*. Two more women in 1959 were, Lorraine H. Hansberry, the first African American woman to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award with her play *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Phyllis Diller, who became the most popular female comedian of the 1950's.³⁵ These women showed they were not members of the "stay at home" club. All of them accomplished

³⁴ Heather C. Hunt, 1999 website, *Women in the 1950's Workplace*.
www.honors.umd.edu/HONR269J/projects/hchunt/main.htm. (Accessed March 26th, 2009).

³⁵ Heather C. Hunt, 1999 website, *Women in the 1950's Workplace*.
www.honors.umd.edu/HONR269J/projects/hchunt/main.htm. (Accessed March 26th, 2009).

extraordinary things, rising above their status by becoming famous and being involved in the working environment.

Women who did choose a career as well as a family often faced scrutiny and sometimes serious marital problems. A study done by Artie Gionopulos and Howard E. Mitchell presented in *Marriage and Family Living* in November of 1957, gathered statistics on working women and their relationships with their husbands. These married women attempted to support their families alongside their husbands. The survey participants were couples who faced counseling and were in need of help to keep their marriage afloat. In the survey these researchers collected, the majority of the husbands of the household said that their wives worked to provide the family with “a higher standard of living,” while the wives said they were, “providing necessities.”³⁶

The results of the study led Gionopulos and Mitchell to decide that most of these rocky marriages were separated into three groups, “(1) The husband disapproves of the wife working, (2) The husband holds no objection to the wife working, or (3) The wife is not working.”³⁷ They noticed that these groups were also placed into problem categories. The majority of the first group members had the most problems in their marriage because the spouses could not agree. The smaller second group dealt with other problems than the woman working because the man had no squabbles with his wife having an occupation. The third group's couples had troubles with financial stability and other economical problems because only the husband brought in money for the family.

³⁶ Artie Gionopulos and Howard E. Mitchell, “Marital Disagreement on Working Wife Marriages,” *Marriage and Family Living*, vol. 19(4), November, 1957.

³⁷ Artie Gionopulos and Howard E. Mitchell, “Marital Disagreement on Working Wife Marriages,” *Marriage and Family Living*, vol. 19(4), November, 1957.

The last sentence of the article stated, “The import of the husband's attitude toward the wife's employment has been studied here within the framework of conflicted marriages and does not warrant generalization to all marriages.”³⁸ Gionopulos and Mitchell realized, not all marriages were going to be exactly like the ones that they had studied. They found it interesting, however, to see the huge marital problems with women who did choose to work and have a family. Men felt the need to be the only providers and hold the stability in the family, with their wives in the workforce, some men faced insecurity and therefore their marriages included turmoil and unrest.

Marriage counseling was not uncommon at the time. Glancing through a copy of *Marriage and Family Living* showed unstable marriages in desperate need of an outsiders help. Numerous articles in this journal dealt with how to cope with a rocky marriage, along with who to talk to about the problems that marriages faced. This journal proved how everyone was not as happy as the “Cleaver Family.”

Not only did the *Marriage and Family Living* journal have exclusive marriage counseling stories, but also gave advice to young women looking for a successful marriage. An article entitled, *The Family Woman's Expanding Role*, was run in August of 1958. Alice K. Leopold wrote this article to encourage women not to buy into societal stereotypes. She explained that even though there are many middle to upper class women in the home, expanding opportunities in the work place were available for women. She stated:

Employment opportunities are expanding for women today; however, they are concentrated mostly in several occupations. Census data of 1958 showed that 30

³⁸ Artie Gionopulos and Howard E. Mitchell, “Marital Disagreement on Working Wife Marriages,” *Marriage and Family Living*, vol. 19(4), November, 1957.

per cent of the employed women are engaged in clerical work or related fields, 16 per cent in factories, 14 per cent in restaurants, hotels, and other 'service' industries, 13 per cent in professions, 11 per cent in households, and the remaining 16 per cent in trade and farm work and other occupations.³⁹

Leopold, a very optimistic woman, led readers to believe that if the stereotypes changed, women would be successful in the workforce as well as in the home. She said, "Full acceptance by society of this more diversified and responsible role will do much towards maintaining and strengthening family relationships."⁴⁰ Leopold was hopeful that one day women and men would work together as both "parents and partners" to provide for their families and become engaged citizens.

Along with influential women who had high, up-standing positions in society, like Mrs. Gillet and Mrs. Beech, many women were housewives, but did not approve of the intense pressure the media directed their way on a daily basis. Unhappy housewives took action and wrote letters to the editors of many important magazines. Brian Thornton wrote in his article, *Subterranean Days of Rage: How Magazine Letters to the Editor in 1952 Foretold a Generation of Revolution*:

In many of these published letters there is simmering rage expressed by unquiet men and women: Many letter writers of 1952, at the beginning of the so-called golden era of the decade, puncture the image of a culture of complacency. They did so by writing letters challenging...the subjugation and limitation imposed on women.⁴¹

Thornton continues by saying there were 340 published letters to magazines like *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*, which demanded changes in women's social roles. One woman

³⁹ Alice K. Leopold, "The Family Woman's Expanding Role," *Marriage and Family Living*, vol. 20(3). 1958.

⁴⁰ Alice K. Leopold, "The Family Woman's Expanding Role," *Marriage and Family Living*, vol. 20(3). 1958.

⁴¹ Brian Thornton, "Subterranean Days of Rage: How Magazine Letters to the Editor in 1952 Foretold a Generation of Revolution," *American Journalism* 24 (January 2007): 61.

wrote that she had, “tried unsuccessfully to find some meaningful work to bring in a good income and keep me busy and interested.”⁴² But instead of providing her with an occupation, she was told to volunteer, or work at a hospital, thrift shop, or church to satisfy her need for employment.⁴³ This woman attempted to stabilize and support her family, and instead of receiving a job, she was bombarded with reasons why she should stay at home, “where she belonged.”⁴⁴ These letters proved that not everyone was buying into the advertisements and articles that the media was selling.

Even some men were able to accept the intelligence of women. *The Saturday Evening Post* released an article written by Eddie Abbott in February of 1955 that showed exactly how some men felt about women. Abbott wrote about a couple of women whom he encountered in an automobile shop. He was extremely impressed with these women because of their knowledge about cars. He stated he had never met a woman with as much intellect about automobiles as these three ladies showed. He became convinced that if taught, women could learn anything. Extremely impressed, he felt the need to share his thoughts with everyone. His article, “Don't Tell Me Women Are Helpless”, was a great success for *The Saturday Evening Post*.⁴⁵

Nancy Walker collected many of these intense media representations in her book,

⁴² Brain Thornton, “Subterranean Days of Rage: How Magazine Letters to the Editor in 1952 Foretold a Generation of Revolution,” *American Journalism* 24 (January 2007): 74.

⁴³ Brain Thornton, “Subterranean Days of Rage: How Magazine Letters to the Editor in 1952 Foretold a Generation of Revolution,” *American Journalism* 24 (January 2007): 74.

⁴⁴ Brain Thornton, “Subterranean Days of Rage: How Magazine Letters to the Editor in 1952 Foretold a Generation of Revolution,” *American Journalism* 24 (January 2007): 74.

⁴⁵ Eddie Abbott, “Don't Tell Me Women Are Helpless,” *Saturday Evening Post*. Vol. 227(35). February 1955.

Women's Magazines 1940-1960.⁴⁶ Within this book, she collected many articles and advertisements from various magazines including *Ladies' Home Journal*, *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Redbook*, and *Seventeen* which gave women some examples of how the “perfect” wife should dress and how she should behave. One such article entitled, “Occupation—Housewife” was written by Dorothy Thomson for the *Ladies' Home Journal* in March 1949.⁴⁷ This article gave a narrative about one housewife who was frustrated with her life. The woman wanted to express her dissatisfaction of her occupation of being a “housewife” was reprimanded by Thompson. The woman stated to Thompson that she had achieved a degree at a highly valued, upstanding college, only to become a stay-at-home-mother. She felt as if her education had been a big waste of time. In the article, Thompson stated otherwise:

This woman married, at twenty-one, a struggling high-school teacher. They went to housekeeping on \$35 a week. They had three children—two sons and a daughter. It took her husband twenty-five years to rise high in his profession, and during fifteen of those years—until an outstanding and popular historical work brought him to the forefront—they had to live on very modest means with exceptionally refined tastes. Their children were grown before teaching and books won him a quite handsome income. But if this break had never happened, my friend would have been no less a success, for her greatest achievements were performed when her husband was earning between \$3,000 and \$5,000 a year. During all that time her husband and family never lived in anything but a well-kept, charming, home...To do what this woman did with her husband's modest income was a feat of management, showing executive ability of a high order.⁴⁸

It is clear from this quote that Dorothy Thompson strongly believed in the value of an educated housewife. There were many women at this time that had the same opinion and

⁴⁶ Nancy Walker, *Women's Magazines 1940-1960*, (New York; Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998).

⁴⁷ Nancy Walker, *Women's Magazines 1940-1960*, (New York; Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998) 161. Dorothy Thomson, “Occupation—Housewife,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, (March 1949).

⁴⁸ Nancy Walker, *Women's Magazines 1940-1960*, (New York; Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998) 162-163. Dorothy Thomson, “Occupation—Housewife,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, (March, 1949).

felt that their place was in the home, but this action fed into the stereotypes of the day. Because they were at home, educated or not, women had plenty of time to watch television, read magazines, or listen to the radio. Having these technologies around was a constant bombardment of information, advertisements, and subliminal messaging, reinforcing stereotypes, influenced the housewife.

Ladies' Home Journal was exceptionally good at getting their message across.

Series advice features such as, *How to Be Marriageable* and *Can This Marriage Be Saved* were included with every edition, and women were sucked into the stories of other people's lives. In one particular article of *Can This Marriage Be Saved*, there was an anonymous woman who felt her career was coming between her needs and the desires of her family. She faced a dilemma, she wanted to be able to lead a fruitful life, which involved having a job, but she also wanted to make her husband happy by being able to provide housewife services to him and her children. The problem was her job required more time from her than her husband wanted to give up. She faced having to choose between her career and her family. Dr. Paul Popenoe gave his advice to column writer, Dorothy Cameron Disney. His advice for this woman was to give up her career, "be a good mother," and spend time with her family. Though this may have been a good thing for the survival of her family; ultimately, if this woman took his advice she would be giving up on her aspirations and dreams.⁴⁹ This woman was an example of the direct impact the media had upon housewives in the 1950s.

On the other hand, there were women who were perfectly happy living out their

⁴⁹ Dorothy Cameron Disney, "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" *Ladies' Home Journal* vol.72(10). October, 1955.

days as homemakers. Brett Harvey interviewed many women for his oral history book, *The Fifties: A Woman's Oral History*,⁵⁰ where some women stated their unhappiness with the lives they chose, but there were several women who thought they had completed the correct pathway in life. His book included an interview of a Mrs. Joy Wilner, Harvey wrote:

'Marriage was going to be the beginning of my real life,' says Joy Wilner, echoing Bonnie Carr. 'It was all I thought about in college. I was so focused on finding this mate I wouldn't allow myself to get carried away by any of my subjects. My feeling was, life was not concerned with work, but with men and dating. When Ted came along, I made him into the right person. He was going to be a doctor, someone who would help the world, and I would help him. He was an idealist and we were going to build a life together.'⁵¹

Joy Wilner was content with her life in the suburbs and was not at concerned with gaining an education. Joy's thoughts were shared by many women at the time.

Another woman Harvey interviewed was Mrs. Julia Harmon. She expressed what her life was like in the middle-class suburbs, "We loved the life there, we had our new little baby and a wonderful circle of friends in the university and in town. I took courses at the university—wonderful courses. I think that may have been where we were the happiest."⁵²She also stated:

There was also a great deal of entertaining—little dinner parties, big dinner parties, cocktail parties, barbecues...but it really was a good life—not too different from what I had anticipated. I was living the dream. As a citizen, I pitched in full metal wherever we lived. I was a member of the Junior League and whatever city we moved to, I had an immediate base, something to hook into right away. I'd usually end up at the art museum or teaching art classes or something like that. That provided an opportunity for me to meet people in my community.⁵³

⁵⁰ Brett Harvey, *The Fifties; a Woman's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1983).

⁵¹ Brett Harvey, *The Fifties; a Woman's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1983).

⁵² Brett Harvey, *The Fifties; a Woman's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1983).

⁵³ Brett Harvey, *The Fifties; a Woman's Oral History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1983).

Joy Wilner and Julia Harmon were two examples of women contented to live as housewives in suburban America during the 1950s. There were other women who held the same opinion of this lifestyle choice.

Even though there were exceptions to the displeased opinion of the “happy housewife,” the media continuously portrayed this one image. This image was present everywhere and it was easy for women to buy into the stereotypes. The advertisements and articles were designed to lure women into paying attention to what they had to say. One of the main purposes of magazines, newspapers, television, and radio was to give women a reason to go shopping. New appliances, inventions, and technologies were popping up everywhere. This marketing scheme directly attacked the middle class women of the 1950s because they were the ones who were going shopping. Women were able to afford new things with their husband’s money. Not only were there direct advertisements, but subliminal ones were present as well. These messages told women and children what to wear, how to behave, and what to believe. The Walt Disney Corporation, not wanting to be left behind, jumped aboard the train and added this marketing campaign into their movies.

V. Disney's *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*

Disney made a name for himself through years of publishing his cartoons and drawings. Throughout his career, Disney was interested in drawing and making his cartoons come to life. When he first created the character Mickey Mouse, Disney prepared to release him to the world as a silent animated character, but before he could show Mickey, sound was synchronized with cartoons allowing Disney to make “Steamboat Willy” which captured the public’s attention like never before. He owned the patent for Technicolor allowing him to be the only one who could make animated movies in color.⁵⁴ Disney's opinion of animation was, "Animation offers a medium of storytelling and visual entertainment which can bring pleasure and information to people of all ages everywhere in the world."⁵⁵ He truly believed that what he was doing brought pleasure to millions around the globe, and he was proved correct time and time again with the successes of his films.

After the tremendous victory with 1937's release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Disney’s fame and popularity became known worldwide. Disney expert, Brad Aldridge, stated on the website, www.justdisney.com:

Walt's optimism came from his unique ability to see the entire picture. His views and visions came from the fond memory of yesteryear, and persistence for the future. Walt loved history. As a result of this, he didn't give technology to us piece by piece; he connected it to his ongoing mission of making life more enjoyable, and fun. Walt was our bridge from the past to the future.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Brad Aldridge. Just Disney. Created August 1999. <http://www.justdisney.com>.(accessed March 27th, 2009).

⁵⁵ Brad Aldridge. Just Disney. Created August 1999. <http://www.justdisney.com>.(accessed March 27th, 2009).

⁵⁶ Brad Aldridge. Just Disney. Created August 1999. <http://www.justdisney.com>.(accessed March 27th, 2009).

Disney's career bloomed almost overnight, and his movies were beloved by millions of people all over the world. The fairy tales that were written down by Grimm Brothers and Charles Perrault hundreds of years before became Disney's choice of animation. Disney took the 17th Century Charles Perrault⁵⁷ version of *Cinderella* and changed it to fit modern times. Disney also worked with *Sleeping Beauty* left by the Grimm Brothers from the 18th Century.⁵⁸

After *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, Disney returned to these children's bedtime stories over and over again. With each tale he presented, Disney added his own twist. These modernized stories subliminally told the public about social expectations and behaviors that were appropriate, while still giving entertainment and happiness to thousands of viewers. During the 1950s Walt Disney released *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*.

Cinderella was one of the most famous Disney movies of all time. This film was given to the public in 1950. *Time Magazine* gave this film a critique:

A small army of Disney craftsmen has given the centuries old Cinderella story⁵⁹ a

⁵⁷ Charles Perrault was a 17th Century Frenchman. He took it upon himself to make oral fairy tales and fables into stories more suitable for children. Originally these stories were created to give societal morals values to adults. Many times these tales would reek of violence, sex, and other inappropriate topics for children. Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brother's changed these stories in a positive way. Disney then took these tales and modernized them to fit into society of the 1950s.

⁵⁸ The German Grimm Brothers, like Perrault, took old oral stories and traditions and transformed them into stories to tell children how to behave within acceptable society. These stories were written down in the 18th Century and have been beloved by people everywhere since then. Disney used both Perrault and the Brothers Grimm in his quest to modernize these stories and keep them alive for children everywhere in the 20th Century.

⁵⁹ "An Ancient, almost universal legend, the tale pops up in 16th Century German literature, was popularized by Charles Perrault's 17th Century French version, which Disney credits as the movie's source."

- Time Magazine, February 20th, 1950.

dewy radiance and comic verve that should make children feel like elves and adults feel like children...With just the right wizard's brew of fancy and fun, sugar and spice; he makes an old, old story seem as innocently fresh as it must to the youngest moppet hearing it for the first time.⁶⁰

From this review, the public loved and adored this rendition of the classic tale.

Jack Zipes, myth and fairy tale expert, believed that Disney was strikingly popular because he was influenced by the social norms of the 1950s. He wrote in his book, *Fairy Talk as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*:

But it would not be an exaggeration to assert that Disney was a radical filmmaker who changes our way of viewing fairy tales, and that his revolutionary technical means capitalized on American innocence and utopianism to reinforce the social and political status quo.⁶¹

In many of Disney's films, subtle hints and moments exist where, if looked at closely, these social stereotypes became noticeable. Both *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* shared common trends of the 1950s.

In Disney's *Cinderella*, he presented her as an orphan taken care of only by her vile and evil step-mother who could care less about her. Step-mothers were extremely important when looking at fairy tales because of the connotations behind these medieval women. Putting Cinderella's step-mother into context, historian Robert Darnton's writes a book entitled, *The Great Cat Massacre: and Other Episodes in French Cultural History*,⁶² in which he said that women in medieval Europe were not allowed to own land or property; this privilege was given to the first born son of a family. Since women often married into families where there were already sons and daughters from the first

⁶⁰ *Time Magazine*. vol.__(__). Cinema Section. February 20th, 1950.

⁶¹ Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*. (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

⁶² Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books a Division of Random House, 1984).

marriage, this meant that her children would receive no inheritance, and essentially have nothing to live on. It made sense to why step-mother's often did not treat their step-children with kindness and affection.⁶³ Cinderella not only had a cruel step-mother to deal with, but she also had two step-sisters that basically made her a slave in her own household. Her only comfort was in talking with her animal friends. Although, Cinderella was beautiful and charming, she was unable to break free from her step-mother's tyrannical rule without the help of magic.

Disney portrays Cinderella's fairy godmother as a kind, grandmother type figure, who was possibly suffering from Alzheimer's disease. The godmother was extremely forgetful and absentminded, while at the same time offering Cinderella the only comfort and love she had experience since her father passed away. It was only after the fairy godmother stepped in that Cinderella was able to move beyond her position and eventually marry the prince. For most of the movie, Cinderella was dressed in rags and hidden behind chores, dirt, and mockery; while still beautiful in this position, no one looked past the grime to see the woman hidden underneath. Only after she was cleansed by magic was she allowed to show off her true self. She met the prince and instantly fell in "love," but this infatuation was short lived because Cinderella's "true self" would wear off with the stroke of midnight.⁶⁴

Applying this revelation to society, women and young girls of the 1950s viewed Cinderella as becoming beautiful only for the purpose of gaining a relationship with a man that she hardly knew. Also, it was only when she shed the dirt and grime of her daily

⁶³ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books a Division of Random House, 1984).

⁶⁴ Walt Disney, *Cinderella*, VHS, Walt Disney Corporation. (1950).

routine did she have a chance at meeting her “true love” and living “happily ever after.” This subliminal message told young girls they must look perfect at all times because they never knew when their “true love” would show up to sweep them off their feet. The message to women and children said, the only way to be truly happy in life was to present the perfect disposition, natural talent, and extreme beauty at all times. In other words, high heels and pearls were perfectly acceptable to wear while cooking and cleaning. Men expected women to be presentable and look their very best for masculine pleasure. Males felt it necessary for women to look presentable in case an important visitor decided to stop over unannounced.

Cinderella was able to fulfill her dreams when the Duke stopped by with her glass slipper. However, she was locked away in her room by her evil step-mother and the only way out required the help of her small animal friends. The mice had been with Cinderella throughout the film, giving her extra help when she needed it. They aided her with her chores, the cooking, the cleaning, and even when she found time to spend on herself, thus substantiating the fact that she was incapable of doing anything for herself. The scene where she needed the help of animals when taking a shower cemented this sense of helplessness and sheer incapability of Cinderella’s character. Only after her mice friends set her free from her captivity, was she able to explain to the Duke that it was her shoe that the prince found. When the Duke justified this outburst by fitting the shoe on her foot, he whisked her away to the palace where she was made beautiful once more. The prince and Cinderella married and she was no longer a slave to her step-mother and step-

sisters, giving the impression that she lived “happily ever after.”⁶⁵

The image of Cinderella gaining the Prince's love and living happily ever after was a pleasant one that Disney wanted to live on forever, but the message that it sent to women and young girls was extremely stereotypical. Cinderella, a fictional character, while entertaining, was not a model of actual life. She was “practically perfect in every way,”⁶⁶ Disney’s interpretation of a “perfect woman,” a fairy tale, not to be taken as an example for a real woman. Cinderella did let girls know that possessing a positive attitude and not complaining stressed a life full of happiness, but she also stood for changing herself to fit into a male dominant society with outlandish standards. No prince would ever look twice at her when she was dressed in rags and dirt, but once she lost that image and gained one of beauty and grace, and ultimately perfection, she had no trouble finding a man. In an article entitled, “Things Walt Disney Never Told Us,” written by Kay Stone in the *Journal of American Folklore*, she stated:

In brief, the popularized heroines of the Grimm's and Disney are not only passive and pretty, but also unusually patient, obedient, industrious, and quiet. A woman who failed to be any of these could not become a heroine. Even Cinderella has to do no more than put on dirty rags to conceal herself completely. She is a heroine only when properly cleaned and dressed.⁶⁷

She agreed that Cinderella was an example of the “perfect woman,” but she also needed to hide her true identity to become what society wanted her to become. It was only after dressing up, changing herself, she was able to come out into the world. She became extremely talented at disguising herself, so much so, that her two step-sisters were

⁶⁵ Walt Disney, *Cinderella*, VHS, Walt Disney Corporation. (1950).

⁶⁶ Reference to Disney's *Mary Poppins* starring Julie Andrews.

⁶⁷ Kay Stone. “Things Walt Disney Never Told Us.” *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 88(347). University of Illinois Press. January-March, 1975.

unable to recognize her. This concealment only lasted until the stroke of midnight, and therefore she needed to use her womanly wiles to get the man of her dreams to fall in love with her and eventually save her from her dark future. She had to be sure to represent herself in a manner which appealed to him and not think twice about what was best for her. Stone stated that women who looked up to this “passive princess” easily:

Recognized her image in various forms of popular entertainment, notably in romantic tales on television and in comic books, magazines, and novels read almost exclusively by women. Even women who had shaken the persistent princess in their daily lives returned to her in fantasy through such popular materials.⁶⁸

These images of Cinderella, and other heroines like her, gave women a false sense of what love and life were like. The same goes for many of Walt Disney's other famous heroines such as Snow White, Ariel, Jasmine, and Belle.

Nine years after *Cinderella's* debut, Disney released his edition of *Sleeping Beauty*. This film was created at the same time Disney was working on Disneyland and bigger things in the Disney Corporation, because of this, *Sleeping Beauty* did not receive the same attentiveness from Walt as *Cinderella* did. The *Time Magazine* review of this film was not as positive as the critique on *Cinderella*.

Movie maker Disney has tangled with an innocent and lovely old folk tale, and this time he can be charged with a particularly unpleasant case of assault and battery. The story itself, as preserved by Charles Perrault, is a legend that elucidates one of life's darkest mysteries: how the human soul lies sunk in a deathlike trance until it is awakened by the heroic spirit...Even the drawing in *Sleeping Beauty* is crude: a compromise between sentimental, crayon-book childishness and the sort of cute, commercial cubism that tries to seem daring but is really just square. The hero and heroine are sugar sculpture, and the witch looks like a clumsy tracing from a Charles Addams⁶⁹ cartoon. The plot often seems to owe less to the tradition of the

⁶⁸ Kay Stone. “Things Walt Disney Never Told Us.” *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 88(347). University of Illinois Press. January-March, 1975.

⁶⁹ Charles Addams: Best known for his cartoons that became known as *The Addams Family*, he was celebrated for his dark humor and crudely drawn characters.

fairy tale than to the formula of the monster movie.⁷⁰

This review suggests that the people disliked *Sleeping Beauty* immensely; however, reviews do not justify the opinions of everyone. Many people hated this Disney film and others loved it. However, it did not do as well as *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, or many other fairy tale films that Disney released. Nevertheless, there were people during the 1950s that watched and learned from this movie.

Aurora or *Sleeping Beauty* was a wonderful story about a young pubescent woman who was sent away from home as an infant. The reason for this abandonment by her parents was because of an evil witch who wished her dead. It was prophesized she would be killed by a spinning wheel on her sixteenth birthday; because of this threat her parents attempt to hide her away from the world. The infant princess was taken care of by three old fairies, Flora, Fauna, and Merrywhether. They all lived in a small cottage deep in the woods. Aurora, or Rose, as the fairies called her, was unaware of her true identity. She did not know she a princess in disguise nor did she understand why she was not allowed outside without a chaperone. Rose, like Cinderella, possessed many woodland creature friends and relied on them to fulfill her need for companionship.

One day, a handsome man accidentally saw Rose singing in the woods and they shared an instant “love” connection. He expressed his wish to meet with her alone, but she knew that she was forbidden and instead made other arrangements. Rose fled and the stranger, Phillip becomes incapable of pushing her from his mind. Later, Phillip, a prince in disguise, tells his father, the King, that he found the woman of his dreams, and

⁷⁰ *Time Magazine*. vol.___(__). Cinema Section. March 2nd, 1959.

she was just “some peasant girl.”⁷¹ This revelation outraged the King and he demanded to know who this woman was and where she came from. Phillip, unable to present this information, angered the King, and because of this, the King forbids Phillip from ever seeing Rose again.

The King was angered by this connection of royalty to peasantry. Rose, being “some peasant girl” was an unacceptable choice for Prince Phillip to marry. This showed that women of low class would be unable to redeem themselves in marriage to someone of high class. The classes should stick together. For example, men of high stature would not look twice at a hotel maid. However, women of higher social classes were to present themselves in a different way, working was below their station. In a way, the medieval class structure was once again became present in the 1950s world.

Meanwhile, the fairies spoke with Rose and discovered that she met a strange man and unfortunately had fallen madly in “love” with him. The fairies forbade Rose from ever seeing him again. Little did they know that because Phillip and Rose were both royalty, their parents had already arranged their marriage from their time of birth. The two characters were destined to be together. On the day of Rose's sixteenth birthday, she was taken back to the castle where her parents planned a grand feast in celebration of her return. Before she could attend, she had to make herself presentable, and she was led to a room where she dressed in a beautiful gown fit to her princess status. While she waited for the celebration to begin, a light appeared and lured her up to a room where a poisoned spinning wheel waited. She pricked her finger on it and fell into a comatose-like state of sleep.

⁷¹ Walt Disney. *Sleeping Beauty*, VHS, Walt Disney Corporation. 1959

In this position, Phillip was forced to fight his way to Rose. He faced thick thorns, monsters, imprisonment, and finally the evil witch who concealed herself as a giant, black, demon-esque dragon. After success in his quest, he found Rose in a tower and brought her back to life with a gentle kiss. True love, once again, conquered all.⁷²

Presented with this action packed production, the film viewer becomes sucked into the soap-opera drama that plays out on the screen. Like *Cinderella*, Disney enforced specific gender roles within his movies to make them modern and applicable to society during the 1950s. Jack Zipes pointed out many of these stereotypes within his book, *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*.⁷³ Zipes specified four main points when looking intently at *Sleeping Beauty*:

- 1) Women are all naturally curious, and, as we know, curiosity kills cats and even sweet, innocent princesses.
- 2) Men are daring, persistent, and able to bestow life on passive or dead women whose lives cannot be fulfilled until rescued by a prince.
- 3) Women are indeed helpless without men, and without men they are generally catatonic or comatose, eternally waiting for the right man, always in a prone, deathlike position, dreaming of a glorious marriage.
- 4) Male energy and will power can restore anything to life, even an immense realm in a coma. We just need the right man for the job.⁷⁴

Sleeping Beauty fit with these stereotypes that Zipes' presented. She was curious enough to follow a bright, shiny light to the spinning wheel which ultimately caused her to fall into a comatose state. She waited for Phillip to come rescue her and proved she was completely helpless without him. Only he could save her because he was her one true love

⁷² Walt Disney. *Sleeping Beauty*, VHS, Walt Disney Corporation. 1959

⁷³ Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*. (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

⁷⁴ Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*. (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

and therefore she was required to wait eternally until he appeared to save the day.

Women saw from this example that the proper way to catch a winning husband was to wait for him to “rescue” them by sweeping them off to a quaint suburban “castle” where they will love each other unconditionally and live contentedly for the rest of their lives.

Zipes stated that Disney changed these tales to fit into modern society. He said, “for Disney ‘Americanized’ the Grimm’s’ texts by celebrating the virile innocence of male power; the domestication of sweet, docile pubescent girls; and the virtues of clean-cut, all-American figures and the prudent, if not prudish life.”⁷⁵ Zipes believed that Disney reinforced a patriarchal society where women lived to serve men. They must bow to the wishes of their husbands and communities to ensure their lives were comfortable and safe.

Zipes also wrote, “In the Disney cinematic versions, the male hero is given an enormous role-particularly in *Sleeping Beauty*, in which he is introduced very early in the narrative and eventually assumes the dominant role by fighting a witch.”⁷⁶ From this, women learn they should not show their level of intelligence or their independence because men are the providers. By hiding their intellect and talents, and instead dressing up and learning proper mannerisms, women were expected to become the perfect housewives and mothers.

One reason for the public disapproval of this film could be credited to the ending of the decade as well. Disney prided himself on giving the public what they wanted to see;

⁷⁵ Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*. (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

⁷⁶ Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tale as Myth, Myth as Fairy Tale*. (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

however, his 1959 version of *Sleeping Beauty* flopped. Nicholas Sammond wrote a book titled, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960*,⁷⁷ where he stated:

There is no doubt that Walter Elias Disney was an entrepreneur of incredible energy, a showman profoundly invested in making entertainments that appealed to a wide segment of the population, and a businessman able to exercise an almost superhuman control over the form and content of those entertainments.⁷⁸

Sammond believed that Disney was an intelligent man when it came to marketing his films to the public; however, the public in 1959 was no longer interested in the stereotypical female roles. The drastic failure of this film was perhaps caused by a changing society where the females were beginning to once again, step out of the role as homemaker. Sammond explains that Disney's lack of intimacy with this film in combination with the changing community at the time was the reason for this failure.

Disney was a charismatic person with great ideas when it came to marketing his films to people of all ages. His films *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* were two examples of films he created for the entertainment of Americans. Both movies reinforced gender stereotypes of the 1950s. These characters were helpless on their own, disguised by dirt and grime, hidden away from the world, they both needed to be saved from their lifestyles by handsome male heroes. Women and children during the 1950s used Disney's films as education tools. They took these social and cultural messages to heart. His media had a tremendous influence on many lives during the 1950s.

⁷⁷ Nicholas Sammond. *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960*. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷⁸ Nicholas Sammond. *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960*. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005), 13.

VI. Conclusion

The 1950s gave us four different categories of women. The first of these groups was women who were successfully confined to their domestic lifestyles by the media. Second the women who expressed their independence through working and lived under the radar of media attention. Third, those women who were discontented over their confinement in the home environment and fourth the collection of women were truly happy with being house wives. The combination of these four categories made up actual population of women of the 1950s.

With the end of World War II, middle-class women migrated out of the factories, offices, and other places of employment and entered into a world of marriage, suburban America, and raised a family. Men were expected to be the providers and support systems for the family unit. A woman's place became the home. The area of domesticity grew tremendously and because of this, the media market multiplied exponentially. With women now in the homes, media had the chance to use television and radios to see new products and social norms. Because of the mass media attention, women became subjected to different stereotypes.

These gender stereotypes were present in many different forms of media throughout the 1950s. Homemakers and their children were constantly hit with media intense advertisements, films, and articles telling them how to behave, how to dress, how to speak, and what to buy. New technologies, inventions, and appliances were marketed to these women on a daily basis. The advertisements argued for new appliances, cars, and tools for making life around the house easier. Women competed with each other over the

newest and latest gadgets. A woman on television wearing high heels and a pearl necklace was not an uncommon occurrence, and because of this, women all over suburban America felt the need to look and act like the women in the commercials.

However, many women chose not to become the stereotypical housewives. These women wanted careers and jobs of their own. They were chastised and frowned upon in society. Working women verses non-working women was a way of determining social class or status. Society made it seem as if those who worked did so because they had to, not because they wanted to. The women who chose to work felt differently than the masses. These women often lived under the detection of magazines, newspapers, and film because they defied the stereotypes the media wanted to present.

Other women expressed their discontent with living in the home environment. Many articles and stories were published about marriage counseling and upset homemakers. Women wanted to get the word out about how unhappy they were with their “perfect” suburban American experience. Letters to the editor and responses to articles were quite common during the 1950s.

Along with the discontented women, some were completely contented with their residential lifestyle. Many women were happy with their lives in the home. Raising children, cooking, cleaning, and caring for the household was something they enjoyed. Bothered not by the idea of male superiority and dominance in society, they chose to live blissfully in a world where they were at times oppressed.

It was a combination of these four categories that made up the world of the 1950s. Women were in all different stages of society, some went to work, others got married and raised a family, and sometimes they even accomplished both working and raising a

family. Media attention was a constant and many found themselves unhappy with the stereotypes and gender roles they were being assigned. Many found reasons to speak out about certain articles or stories; but, for the most part the average female of the 1950s was a passive yet strong person.

Disney used society's stereotypes to reinforce the "perfect woman" in his productions of *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty*. These characters showed women the roles they were to play in society. Women and children subjected to these films learned cultural stereotypes. Disney's versions of these beloved fairy tales were extremely popular and well received within the United States and eventually the world.

The Disney Corporation and others like it chose to identify and assimilate to the stereotypes of the time. This gave the media the go-ahead when it came to portraying gender roles on television, the radio, and in advertisements throughout the decade. By the end of the 1950s it was clear to some members of society that things were about to change. The malicious review of Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* points to a radical shift in the thinking of middle-class society by 1959.

Though it all, the 1950s is one of America's favorite decades to remember. Even with the obvious portrayal of gender roles within the media, the public is still nostalgic about these ten years. The stereotypes during the decade gave women something to strive to become. The media showed women how to dress, what to say, how to behave, and what to buy. With all the new technologies and the boom in industry, it is easy to see how society and media influenced the societal roles of women and children throughout the 1950s.

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