

Disney Is "A Very Inclusive, Forward-Thinking Company," but Are They?: The Presence of
Homosexuals in Disney Animated Films

Cinderella and Prince Charming share true love's kiss as they ride off in a carriage into the sun, happily ever after; Ariel and Prince Eric sail out to sea under a beautiful rainbow as they share true love's kiss; Tiana and Prince Naveen share true love's kiss, turning them from frogs back to humans, and then share another kiss as the film comes to a close. This "happily ever after" is what Disney has indoctrinated in children's minds, yet Disney's vision of happily ever after is a very narrow interpretation of the phenomenon. These images are what are expected when popping in an animated Disney movie; however, what is missing in each of these films is the presence of characters with atypical sexuality, or in other words gays and lesbians. Disney has shown increasing support for the gay community within the last two decades through actions such as Gay Days, a high concentration of gay employees and offering health benefits for same sex partners, and extending their "Fairy Tale Weddings" package to same sex couples, among other things. Despite all of their blatant support for the gay community, where Disney's support lacks is in their animated films. Aside from speculations about the sexuality of characters from several films such as Timon and Pumbaa from *The Lion King*, Scar from *The Lion King*, Genie from *Aladdin*, and Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, there has yet to be a Disney film in which a character—neither main nor support—has been openly gay or lesbian. Although the Walt Disney Corporation does a good deal to support gays and lesbians publicly, it is in their lack of advocating for the normalization of homosexuality within their animated children's films that their support falters. Disney's animated films have long since been a driving force behind the social views and stereotypes that children adopt and follow throughout their adolescence; thus, Disney should increase their support of gays and lesbians through the lens of their animated films in an attempt to produce a more comfortable, tolerant social environment for generations to come. Were the writers and creators of Disney

animated films to consider these positive effects a gay character could have on the lives of their target audiences, they could use their occupations as a means for creating a better social environment.

It is without question that Disney has in fact done a great deal to support the gay community, made evident by Gay Days at Disney each June, Disney's legalization of same-sex Fairy Tale Weddings in the parks, and Disney's offering of spousal benefits for their large quantity of gay employees, as well as in many other ways. From June second to seventh of this year the 24th annual Gay Days Orlando will be taking place at the Magic Kingdom in Disney World. Gay Days began in 1991 as a single day in June on which members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community were encouraged to "Wear Red and Be Seen" while visiting the Disney parks (Clarke). "Disney has never officially sanctioned Gay Days and has asked employees to treat [them]...just like any other day," yet these days have become increasingly popular and important to gays throughout the past 24 years—attracting over 160,000 members of the LGBT community each year (Cloud 69). Despite their "neutrality," in recent years Disney has begun to show more obvious support, selling merchandise displaying rainbow-colored Mickey Mouse heads and other rainbow trinkets throughout its parks as well (Clarke). Although Disney does not overtly support Gay Days, their allowance of such a large group of likeminded people in the park during regular operating hours, intermingling with "regular" park-goers, serves as an area of contention. It can be seen that this coupling of Disney and Gay Days serves to impact a massive captured audience of children, exposing them to the support and normalization of homosexuality. In addition to their support for Gay Days, Disney has extended their Fairy Tale Wedding package to same-sex couples.

On Thursday April 5, 2007 The Walt Disney Co. adjusted their policy regarding same-sex couples participating in Disney's Fairy Tale Wedding experience. Since 1991 Disney has offered

Fairy Tale Wedding packages to heterosexual couples looking to tie the knot in a manner “befitting the dreams of a princess,” which allows them to get married at Disneyland, Disney World, or on Disney’s Cruise Ships along with the assistance of an official Disney wedding planner—for an extra fee couples can even hire formal wear-clad Mickey and Minnie to be wedding guests. Prior to 2007 same-sex couples were able to partake in commitment ceremonies in rented meeting rooms at the Disney resorts, but they were unable to purchase the Fairy Tale package or hold the event within the actual parks (Ahrens). When asked about this change in Disney’s policies, Disney Parks spokesman Donn Walker said that Disney “believes this change is consistent with [their] longstanding policy of welcoming all guests in an inclusive environment,” such that Disney strives to make everyone feel welcome, included, and accepted in things Disney-related (Ahrens). Not only does Disney place the importance of these feelings on their customers, but they extend this attitude of inclusion, acceptance, and welcoming within their employee community as well.

In 1995, Disney made a dynamic switch when they announced that they would extend health coverage to live-in partners of gay and lesbian employees—a decision that Disney made in order to align their health benefits with their corporate nondiscrimination policy (New York Times 21). This action of pro-gay support by Disney set an example for other companies at the time, prompting other companies to feel that, “If it’s good enough for Disney, maybe it’s something we should consider” (New York Times 21). The effect Disney’s actions had, and continue to have, on the actions of countless other companies and individuals has an indisputably strong presence; thus, there is a large importance on Disney making wise decisions when choosing what causes they support, for they stand to set the tone for years to come. Along with their extension of health benefits for homosexual employees, Disney has a large quantity of gay employees and, as one employee stated, “Many of the best people in this business are gay, and the company has gradually

created a work environment where gay employees feel valued and respected" (Romesburg 26). With Gay Days and allowing same-sex Fairy Tale Weddings, along with their equal opportunity employment and employee benefits, president of the Family Research Council, Tony Perkins, feels that "for years, Disney has reflected the values of America...[and now] it could be argued that they are trying to shape those values in a very radical way" (Ahrens). Perkins' view empowers Disney's support for the gay community such that they have the potential to better the world through their support of gays, and what the impact that Disney's support stands to enact in surrounding communities. Despite Disney's undeniable support for gays and lesbians in these ways, the point of contention lies in whether or not Disney is doing enough to truly make a difference in the lives of homosexuals and their families.

Disney's physical support for gays and lesbians has an obvious presence, but the lack of support for the homosexual community in Disney animated films has an equivalently evident existence as well. In GLAAD's *2013 Studio Responsibility Index*, the organization that seeks to promote understanding, increase acceptance, and advance equality for LGBT people reports on the "state of LGBT representation in the mainstream film industry by examining [the] community's onscreen presence" (GLAAD 3). GLAAD examined the LGBT community's presence in films from Hollywood's six largest film studios put out during 2012, with The Walt Disney Studios being one of these "Big Six" studios. As probably the most easily recognizable studio out of the six, Walt Disney Pictures—along with their subdivisions—is famous primarily for their animated features. Despite their extensive presence in the film industry, based on GLAAD's research, "Walt Disney Studios has the weakest record when it comes to LGBT-inclusive films of those studios tracked...with the animated divisions having no content to speak of" (16). Aside from speculation of the occasional character with potentially questionable sexuality—but never a clearly defined gay

or lesbian—Disney’s support for the homosexual community falters when it comes to their animated films. Not only do Disney’s animated films lack support for gays and lesbians through the characterization of these sexualities, but also there are many instances of anti-gay sentiments in Disney’s animated films.

One instance of anti-homosexuality in a Disney animated film occurs in their 2007 film, *Enchanted*. During one scene Prince Edward is going from door to door searching for Giselle. At his fourth apartment the door opens to a large, leather-clad man who eyes Edward very suggestively—in a way that two men would never typically look at each other in a Disney film. In response to this suggestive encounter, Prince Edward acts very uncomfortable and then proceeds to politely smile and move on to the next door very quickly. This instance denounces homosexuality and essentially renders it worthless—as Prince Edward hardly acknowledges the existence of this man—such that Disney is showing children homosexuality is not something they should even acknowledge. In their 2009 film, *The Princess and the Frog*, one of Disney’s first visuals is in support of homophobia. The main character, Tiana, is seen riding the streetcar, and the man sitting in the seat beside her decides to give her a flower; however, as he turns to retrieve the flower Tiana exits the streetcar, and when the man turns back around he ends up offering the flower to a large man standing beside the seat Tiana had been in. The large man frowns with an overtly disapproving and disgusted look—blatant homophobia—and the man with the flower shrinks back ashamed and embarrassed. Within just the first five minutes of the film, Disney manages to denounce homosexuality and present it as something to be embarrassed or ashamed of. Through lack of support for gays and lesbians within their animated films, Disney is missing out on the opportunity to help a large portion of their target audience.

While Disney does a great deal to show their support for gays and lesbians through their public, physical actions, it is where their support lacks—in their animated films—that stands to assist gay and lesbian acceptance the most. The target audience for Disney's films is boys and girls ranging from four to twelve years old, and, within that population, a large portion are bound to have some connection to homosexuality—whether it be their parents, their sibling, themselves, or others. Disney's films seek to present images and ideas that all children can empathize with, and have messages that can be applied to each child's personal life; however, the animated films so popular with children provide those that are homosexually-connected with very little to help them deal with their troubles. In the article from the journal, *Pediatric Nursing*, author Janice Selekman discusses the implications of homosexuality on children and parents, with a focus on what children need in order to feel comfortable with their, or their parents', sexuality. Selekman notes that, "Homophobia, or fear of those who are homosexual, is taught from one person to another. If society does not accept them, they may not accept themselves. For young people with gay or lesbian parents, if the behaviors of their parents are viewed by friends and society as bad, they may think they too must be bad" (Selekman 455). That being said, the presence of a gay character—simple acknowledgment of the existence and acceptance of homosexuals—has the potential to help young children struggling with sexuality to feel that they are, or their family situation is, both normal and okay. Disney's animated films have always served as a vehicle for teaching children of social norms, and the addition of a homosexual character would be a giant step in the right direction for Disney.

When most Americans think back on their early childhood to the first movie they remember seeing, many would respond with the title of one of Disney's animated films. It is during their early, formative years that children buy into the Disney product, watching film after film without

realizing what the impact of the messages of these films are. It is through these films that children learn about true love at first sight between men and women, happily ever after, gender roles, and the importance of strong family relationships, among other things. The issue here lies in the impossibility of attaining a life like that of a Disney princess, and the exclusion of so many aspects of reality in these messages—namely “extra-ordinary” sexual orientations. In the essay “Look Out New World, Here We Come”? Race, Racialization, And Sexuality In Four Children's Animated Films By Disney, Pixar, And DreamWorks,” by Carmen Lugo-Lugo and Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo, they argue that entertainment is an educational force, and animated films possess “at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching roles, values, and ideals as more traditional sites of learning” (167). Additionally, they argue that “media culture has become a substantial, if not the primary educational force in regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms, that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions—what it means to claim an identity as male, female, white, black, citizen, noncitizen” (167). With the arguments of Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo in mind, Disney’s effect on the views and stereotypes that children develop has an undeniable authority. The Disney animated films that children are harmlessly viewing on repeat are actually playing a huge role in the development of their identities; furthermore, based on the homogenous romantic theme of true love between man and woman throughout the majority of Disney films, and the absence of any gay character—regardless how major or minor—a lack of acceptance and understanding of gays is ingrained in children’s minds from the beginning. Were Disney to move to include some sort of homosexual character, they would stand to alter the way that homosexuality is viewed by generations to come.

As a result of the views and stereotypes that children develop from the plethora of animated films supporting heterosexual lifestyles with no acknowledgment of the existence of an alternate

sexuality, homosexual children and children of homosexual parents take a mental, emotional, social, and sometimes even physical beating. While some may think that young children are not old enough to know their sexual orientation, seventy-five percent of males and sixty-six percent of females who identify as homosexual note that they began to feel differently as early as eight years old (Selekman 454). That being said, they impact that the messages Disney movies have really can have an effect on children at a very young age. Gay children and children with gay parents typically experience bullying and harassment in school settings, with thirty-three to forty-nine percent of children having experienced such victimization. Additionally, as a result of feelings of loneliness and depression, gay and lesbian youth account for thirty percent of suicides in teenagers (Selekman 454-5). Many children have difficulty coming out at all, for a lack of information or support regarding sexual orientation and someone with whom they feel comfortable voicing their concerns pressures them into silence; however, if Disney were to include and normalize homosexuals in their animated films, the fates of these confused children may change.

While it may be farfetched to assert that Disney's next princess film should feature a princess who falls in love and marries another princess, it should not be too much to, at the least, support the inclusion of a minor homosexual character. Although always a fantasized version of reality, if Disney seeks to depict an applicable reality then they "should at the very least include [homosexuals] in the world their film is depicting. Even when LGBT people or couples are simply part of a larger ensemble or featured in a brief, casual manner, the audience is reminded that those characters are a part of the film's world...it creates a more detailed and accurate reflection" (GLAAD 7). Creating a more detailed and accurate reflection of society as it is, or as it should be, gives Disney the power to direct the forward motion of society, for as little as casual acceptance of homosexuals through portrayal as even a minor character "can help foster understanding and shift

public opinion” (GLAAD 4). If Disney’s intent is for children to be able to see themselves in the characters, then a homosexual character is one that should without question be included in some fashion. Not only would this foster a feeling of acceptance and inclusion for those children struggling with their sexual orientation, but also it would acknowledge and normalize the existence of this minority group of people such that others may accept them. Homosexuality is a normal, natural, common occurrence, and Disney should use their prevalent presence in the lives of children to ensure this is something that is not only understood, but also believed and supported as well.

Although Disney’s physical support of gays and lesbians, such as Gay Days and Fairy Tale Weddings for homosexuals, is admirable and beneficial, it is their symbolic support that plays a bigger role in the betterment of society. While the government can pass law after law regarding equality based on sexual orientation, it is socially—not politically—where these equality movements must really take shape. The symbolic gesture of Disney featuring a homosexual character in an animated film sends a clear message that, not only does Disney support the homosexual community, but they seek for everyone from the children to the elderly to develop an acceptance for this community as well. It is this symbolic gesture of inclusion that holds the most importance, and would change the shape of ideals and stereotypes developed from the beginning of childhood. The physical effects of the lack of acceptance and understanding for homosexuals are evident, and, if Disney is truly the progressive, innovative, forward thinking, leader in entertainment that it claims to be, then their support for homosexuals must stretch into their animated films. In doing so, Disney’s legacy would carry onward and upward, and they could be the driving force behind a social adjustment to society in which more people feel accepted and included.

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