# Media Studies



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# Gender & Representation in the *Toy*Story Franchise



(http://desktopwallpaper-s.com/16-Cartoons/-/Toy\_Story/)

The aims of this Factsheet are to:

- provide an overview of gender stereotypes used in Disney and Pixar films
- explore how *Toy Story* both reinforces and challenges traditional cinematic gender stereotypes
- analyse the ways in which a range of characters are represented across the *Toy Story* films

# Gender stereotypes on film

The representation of gender on film is a source of constant debate. Popular films and television are frequently criticised for their reinforcement of traditional gender **stereotypes**, which see the male as active or dominant and the female as passive and controlled by men. These on screen representations reflect a wider, influential social system, known as **patriarchy**. A **patriarchal society** is seen to favour the masculine over the feminine; men typically have power and control and women have a disadvantaged, lower status. The repetition and reproduction of these gender roles on the big screen serves to reinforce and perpetuate patriarchal ideologies, resulting in a narrow range of gender stereotypes for women. Traditionally, men are stereotypically portrayed as heroic, adventurous and aggressive whereas women are stereotyped as inferior, domestic or home-based, sex objects or distressed damsels in need of male rescue.

As gender roles become increasingly equal within contemporary society, on-screen representations can be said to have changed and responded, offering audiences more **dynamic** character types and representations. *Gauntlett* (2008) argues that today, a wider variety of images and gender representations are offered on screen and *Tasker* (1998) also considers new, stronger cinematic images of women such as the action hero, the detective or the cowgirl. *Decker* (2010) suggests that in particular, the films of Disney subsidiary Pixar represents a major step towards on-screen equality.

**Exam Hint:** When discussing the concept of representation, make sure you use appropriate media studies terminology such as 'mediation', 'selection' and 'focusing', in other words, show an awareness of how the representations are constructed rather than simply describing what they are like.



http://www.virginmedia.com/images/The-Little-Mermaid.jpg
A juxtaposition of female types in *The Little Mermaid* 

#### The Disney Princess

The 'classic' Disney film stays rooted within the fantasy / fairy tale / romance genre and, as such, can be seen to perpetuate traditional, patriarchal values and subsequent gender roles. Men are seen to occupy positions of power and authority, with women primarily featured in the 'princess' role. The female's interests lie solely in the acquisition of a 'happily ever after' romance, as seen in films such as *Little Mermaid* or *Tangled. Wilson* (2010) says of the narrow view of gender presented within the classic Disney film: "... you can either be a princess awaiting her prince or an evil stepmother / witch; as a man, you get all the action (in many senses of the word). And beauty, of course, equals white, blonde, thin and young."

Female characters are presented as beautiful, passive and dependent or objects awaiting male rescue or romance; their actions serve to motivate the male characters within the narrative. Males are presented as courageous, heroic and strong, often carrying out a dangerous mission or objective which once complete, will allow him to rescue the princess. The **ideology** or message behind the films reinforces the idea that a woman's only hope of happiness exists through the acquisition of male love.

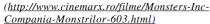
Female characters who do not display traditionally 'feminine' qualities of obedience, beauty and kindness are represented as old, ugly, evil and of bad intention. These characters are frequently juxtaposed against the youthful, beautiful princess. This can be seen in Disney's *Tangled*, which depicts an evil stepmother's quest for eternal youth, achieved by holding the beautiful Rapunzel captive.

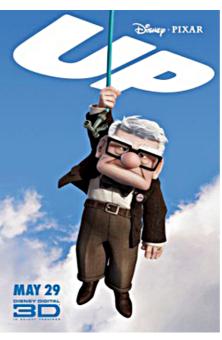


(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangled)

# Representation in Disney & Pixar films







(<u>http://thefilmstage.com/news/new-character-posters-for-pixars-up/</u>)



(http://screenrant.com/enough-alreadywith-the-wall-e-short-circuitcomparisons-vic-1372)

These images illustrate that many Pixar films are 'male-centred'

Pixar attempts to display a more dynamic and complex view of femininity than previously seen in the classic Disney film, with a removal of the constraints of the Disney princess. Its films show some deviation from established gender norms, breaking from traditional sex-stereotyped gender portrayals. The films are populated with strong, independent, intelligent characters with unconventional appearances that refuse to adhere to the idealised notions of female beauty seen in the Disney princess.

These characters, however, exist secondary to the male who takes up centre stage as the lone protagonist. The tradition of the male centered Pixar film sees female characters outnumbered by males three to one, with males taking up considerably more screen time. Feisty, humorous characters such as Elastigirl (*The Incredibles*), Dory (*Finding Nemo*) and Jessie (*Toy Story*) are often used as devices to aid the development or journey of the male protagonist. *Hopkins* (2010) argues that the Pixar female is seen to occupy a combination of the following roles: "...helpers, love interests, and moral compasses to the male characters whose problems, feelings, and desires drive the narratives."

The Pixar male, whilst usually a traditional leader or hero, is also seen to depart from some stereotypical norms of the 'strong male', often showing emotion, sensitivity and kindness. Interestingly, Pixars' villains are wholly male: Syd, Zurg and Stinky Pete in *Toy Story* present the idea that males are engaged in more aggressive, defiant behaviour than their female counterparts who are presented as compliant and good.

# Activity

Compare two Disney or Pixar films. For each one, answer the following questions:

- 1. How many male / female characters exist within the film?
- 2. What roles do the male / female characters fulfil? Are they gender stereotypical?

**Exam Hint:**- Show an understanding of what stereotypes are used within the media texts you have studied. Are they conventional or dynamic (new) to the genre?

## Representation in Toy Story

Toy Story follows the Pixar tradition of male occupied films with the films centring on the adventures of Buzz and Woody until the introduction of Jessie in Toy Story 2 and 3. Secondary characters such as Bo-Peep, Mrs Potato Head, Barbie and Andy's mum also feature, but their stories remain less significant than those of their male counterparts, whilst presenting traditional female stereotypes of wife, mother and love interest. Male characters fulfil the equally gendered roles as cowboy, spaceman, soldier and villain. In Toy Story 3, Andy holds up both Buzz and Woody in order to decide which of the two to take to college, reiterating in his and the audience's mind, that these are the two most important toys within the narrative.

#### Woody

Woody fulfils a number of stereotypically male roles by acting as the primary protector and provider to the group. The cowboy is another traditional American male iconic role, who usually occupies the male –centred Western **genre** as someone to be respected and often feared. Woody's 'sheriff' status reinforces the idea that he is in a position of authority and should be seen as the leader. Other toys depend on and look up to him. His heroic qualities are represented through his often selfless, caring persona.



Buzz & Woody (http://disney-clipart.com/ toy-story/jpg/characters/ Buzz-Woody.php)

Voiced by Tom Hanks whose **star persona** is that of the likeable, relatable 'everyman', the character of Woody presents male audiences with a realistic figure of identification in place of the unattainable, unrealistic qualities of the Disney prince. Woody makes the ultimate sacrifice during the **re-equilibrium** of *Toy Story 3* when he makes the decision to leave Andy and go with the rest of the toys to live with Bonnie. This scene illustrates Woody's unwavering loyalty to the group.

#### **Buzz Lightyear**

The character of Buzz embodies many traditional male qualities. Buzz's masculine identity is based on conventional ideas; he is stubborn, adventurous and brave, an 'action hero' sent from the 'Universe Protection Unit' in a mission to save the galaxy from Evil Emperor Zurg. He embodies a variety of male stereotypes and gendered occupations such as the spaceman or astronaut. He immediately sees Woody as his main rival in their initial battle to become Andy's favourite toy, before becoming joint alpha male and co-leader of the group alongside Woody. His masculine status lies in his obvious strength, physical endurance and stamina. His appearance is strong, bulky and masculine, his shoulders are broad and muscular, his jaw-line chiselled. He is made of strong, durable material suggesting notions of toughness, in comparison to Woody's soft, slim physique. His catchphrase 'to infinity and beyond' suggests that the sky is the limit for Buzz, reinforcing ideas of male ambition, achievement and success. Both Buzz and Woody design the plans and rescue missions carried out across the films and play pivotal roles in their success.

#### Ken

A recent addition to the franchise, Ken can be seen to exhibit the characteristics of the 'new man', a 1990's concept that presented an emerging male type as sensitive and appearance obsessed. The rise of advertising and consumerism during this era saw the male replace traditional symbols of masculinity such as strength and

honour with consumer goods such as fast cars and designer clothes. Male representations of the new man, also known as the 'metrosexual' reflect the impact the rise in advertising and consumerism has had on the contemporary male. Ken represents the male as a self-centred, fashion-obsessed diva. Ken is first introduced through a slow pan up his body, a shot usually used to sexualise female characters from a male viewpoint. Here it is used to linger on Ken's smooth, tanned physique, a body synonymous with the new man. Ken is later 'tortured' by Barbie in a faux interrogation sequence which sees her destroying his clothes rather than causing him physical pain, much to Ken's greater torment. Ken uses Barbie as more of a fashion accessory than a love interest, alluding to questions surrounding the character's sexuality.

#### Jessie

Jessie was introduced in *Toy Story* 2, described by Andy as 'the roughest, toughest Cowgirl in the West'. Her status as a cowgirl signifies her athletic and adventurous nature. She is the 'tritagonist', the third most important character after Woody and Buzz, often acting as leader to the group in their absence.



Jessie
(http://www.free-wallpapers.org
.uk/movie/toy-story-3/cow-girl/)

Her appearance, unlike Barbie, does not adhere to conventional female ideals. She is green-eyed and red-haired, signifying her nonconformist and fiery nature. She is the classic tomboy type, defined as a girl who exhibits more stereotypically masculine traits. Jessie wears less feminine clothes, in her western-style shirt, sturdy trousers, hat and boots. She engages in activities that are seen as physical and rough. She is deep-voiced, stubborn and as witty as her male counterparts. Within the opening sequence in Toy Story 3, Jessie rescues Woody, saving his life. However, at the end of the film, she is rescued by Buzz in a sequence that places her in the stereotypical role of 'damsel in distress'. The sequence is filmed in slow motion using soft focus to enhance the spectacle of Buzz. His expression remains serious as he carries Jessie, showing his strength, whilst she looks at him adoringly. The end of the film sees Jessie falling for Buzz and living 'happily ever after', displaying the classic Disney re-equilibrium.

## Mrs Potato Head

Mrs Potato Head displays many female characteristics that could be deemed dynamic. In the opening sequence of *Toy Story 3*, she is seen as Mr Potato Head's partner in crime in a train robbery that appears to reference the notorious Bonnie and Clyde.



Mrs Potato Head

http://www.film.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/ 04/38845094-38845097-large.jpg

Mrs Potato Head takes charge of the heist, displaying assertiveness, defiance and leadership skills. She is also seen as the purveyor of the 'female gaze', a theory that suggests that men, as well as women, appear on film as sexual objects of desire for audience consumption. In *Toy Story 3*, she grabs hunky mutant Twitch's muscles as Mr Potato Head looks on, comparing his inferior physique. Later, Sunnyside leader and villain Lotso literally removes her mouth alluding to women's lack of voice under patriarchal rule.

#### Andv's Mum

A common criticism of cinematic females is their on-screen engagement with domestic duties and depictions of women based solely within the home, rather than outside employment. This can be said for Andy's Mum as we see her primarily involved in caretaking duties: being responsible for Andy and his sister Molly, the organisation of Andy's birthday parties, spring cleaning and yard sales. However, Andy's Mum could be seen as a successful, organised single mother as there is no mention or sight of Andy's father throughout the franchise. His Mum, therefore, acts as the sole provider and head of the household and clearly has a good relationship with Andy.

#### **Barbie**

Barbie is a cultural icon, the epitome of idealised feminine perfection: blonde, blue eyed and long legged. *Toy Story* presents Barbie in a mostly stereotypical fashion; overly emotional and wearing skin tight, revealing clothing with the traditional female goal of living a life with Ken in his 'dream house'. Barbie is presented as decorative arm candy to fashionista Ken and is treated as his fashion accessory or plaything. However, Barbie is seen to reject Ken, staying loyal to the other toys and playing an instrumental role in their successful escape from Sunnydale (*Toy Story 3*).

**Exam Hint:** When analysing representations of characters within film, deconstruct the 'film language' used to construct the representation. This could include visual codes such as costume, hair, make up, setting and props or technical codes including camera shot /angles, soundtrack and editing techniques.



Barbie & Ken
(http://www.google.co.uk/imgres?q=barbie+toy+story&um=
1&hl=en&safe=active&sa=N&rls=com.microsoft:engb&tbm=isch&tbnid=KHH-asvI\_K3gfM:&imgrefurl=)

#### Activity

Watch the opening train robbery sequence of Toy Story 3. Note how the following characters are represented.

Character	Analysis of representation and use of stereotypes (appearance, behaviour, actions)
Buzz	
Woody	
Mr Potato Head	
Mrs Potato Head	
Rex	
Натт	
Jessie	

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