A Beauty but a Funny Girl

“No denying she’s a funny girl, that Belle” (Beauty and the Beast, Chapter 2).

This is a statement that is sung during the opening song “Belle” from the 1991 film Beauty and the Beast. The Disney motion picture tells the story of an unusual girl, Belle, who becomes the captive of a horrifying monster who is only known as the Beast. Beauty and the Beast was an unusual film for it turned the idea of a damsel in distress upon its head, instead having the female lead be the savior for the male lead. Belle was structured in such a way that she would appeal to modern audiences and appear to be a strong minded, independent young woman.

The beginning of the film starts with the traditional “Once Upon a Time…” tactic, but does not move on to tell the story of a Princess like earlier Disney fairy tales. The narrator tells the story of a young prince, who denied shelter to a beggar woman; even though the woman offered him a gift (a red rose). Once she was dismissed by the prince again, she revealed her true form to be that of an enchantress. The enchantress was able to tell from his actions that the prince had no love in his heart and to punish him, she placed a spell upon his castle. The spell affected both the prince and all those who lived within the castle walls. The Prince was turned into the horrifying Beast, while his servants were all transformed into various pieces of furniture and appliances. The Prince was said to have one chance at redemption, if he could learn to love and have that love returned. It was stated by the narrator that he needed to earn this love by the time the last petal upon the red rose wilted away or he would be stuck as a Beast forever.
It is interesting to note that later in the film, during the song “Be Our Guest”, the servant Lumiere states that they have been under the influence of the spell for ten years. Keeping in mind that during the opening sequence the narrator says the rose will remain in bloom until the Beast’s 21st year, which would lead the audience to believe the spell was placed upon the castle by the enchantress when the prince was only 11 years old. This could be implied that the enchantress had overreacted about the prince’s actions, for it is not unusual for children to be selfish in their own ways. Had the Prince been a mature young adult and reacted in the same manner, then her punishment could be viewed as just and necessary. But to place an eleven year old boy and all the servants who had done nothing wrong at all under a possibly permanent spell could be viewed as harsh and cruel.

Bearing this in mind, it plays upon the general stereotype of most enchantresses’ and witches within the Disney lore being antagonists. Women that can yield magic are often the villains within Disney motion pictures, though not all the time. In Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, the evil stepmother had the ability to transform herself into an old woman and keep tabs on Snow White through her magic mirror. In Sleeping Beauty the character of Maleficent places a curse upon Princess Aurora and even transforms herself into a dragon. Even the more recent Disney films stick to this model, for the sea witch Ursula in The Little Mermaid uses magic to transform Ariel into a human and then eventually herself. Consistently magic wielding females are viewed in a negative light and used as antagonists in the main narrative of the Disney films. It could be assumed that the enchantress from the beginning of Beauty and the Beast was the films primary antagonist, and not the character of Gaston. The films general purpose is to overcome the
spell that has been placed upon the castle by the enchantress, while Gaston’s strive to kill
the Beast could be viewed as the sub plot, making him the secondary antagonist.

Following the introductory narration, the film moves away from the castle and the
Beast’s trouble, with an omniscient quote of “For who could ever learn to love a Beast”
(Beauty and the Beast, Chapter 1). Immediately after the film shows its opening title and
introduces the character of Belle, a young girl who lives with her father in a little,
presumably French, town. The films first song, titled after the main character, takes place
as a way of explaining Belle’s personality to the viewer. The entire town gossips about
how odd of a girl Belle is while Belle sings about how every day is the same.

The entire scene shows various feminism stereotypes being played out around
Belle, while she breaks from the general mold. One woman is shown to be looking at a
meat merchant, who has a very suggestive form, with as obvious cleavage as a Disney
film will allow being portrayed. The meat merchant looks upon the woman with a sense
of desire and behind him, his wife has a rolling pin in her hands and an angry look,
displaying that she is jealous by her husband’s actions. The woman even proceeds to hit
him against the head for his behavior before the animation moves away from the couple,
following Belle’s movements. Also shown within in the scene is a woman with multiple
children, saying how she “needs six eggs,” and the merchant tells her “that’s too
expensive” (Beauty and the Beast, Chapter 2). This plays upon the idea of a poor woman
having more children then she can afford, which was probably forced upon her by either
a lover or a husband, giving her little choice in the matter.

But the scene, as stated earlier, is focused upon Belle more than anything else.
When she is walking through the town, she attempts to tell a Baker about the book she
had just finished reading. He seemed completely uninterested, so she walks away. Once she is in the book shop, she asks the owner if they had anything new in. When she is told that they do not, she chooses a book that she has already borrowed twice. This could be an attempt to have the audience believe she has read every single book within the store and establish that the girl is interested in literature. She describes the book to the owner, in an attempt to establish why it is her favorite. “Well it’s my favorite. Far off places, daring sword fights, magic spells, a prince in disguise…” (*Beauty and the Beast*, Chapter 2). Her words perfectly describe what will happen to her later on in the film, which could be viewed as foreshadowing.

After leaving the book shop, the town members sings the lyric “And her nose stuck in a book, what a puzzle to the rest of us is Belle” (*Beauty and the Beast*, Chapter 2). This demonstrates how Belle is an outcast to the rest of the town for her literary ambitions. Further escalating her status as an outcast is when the character of Gaston approaches her after the song is finished. He snatches her book from her, perplexed by how she can enjoy a book without pictures. He states that “It’s about time you got your head out of those books and paid attention to more important things, like me” (*Beauty and the Beast*, Chapter 3). He even further continues by saying how it isn’t right for a woman to be reading, for she’ll start getting ideas and thinking. Belle does not care about how the town views her and this shows how modern views of women in our society affected the writers when developing her character.

Unlike previous Disney heroines, Belle also is not affected by the first male she sees in the films narrative. Gaston’s advances have no affect upon her. The three blonde girls often shown within the film seem to be completely in love with Gaston and only
think about him, which plays upon the stereotype that blondes are dense. They do not see Gaston’s pompous attitude or abusive nature; they only see a man with many muscles and long hair. Belle (who is a brunette) does not have this reaction; she views him as rude and conceited.

Belle also does not succumb to the mold of the damsel in distress role, in more than one case she is the savior. When her father is captured by the Beast, she is the one who goes out in attempts to find him. Once she discovers the Beast’s castle, she goes inside with barely any hesitation. Upon discovering her father in a cell, she says that they have to find a way to get him out. Once the Beast enters the scene, though, she offers to take her father’s place. The daughter essentially gives her life up, forced to live in a dark and dank castle, so that her father would be free. She is the savior for her father, even if he opposes the idea.

After enduring the Beast’s anger, which she received for going into a room he told her was off limits; she tries to escape from the castle. She takes her own destiny into her hands by running away and is nearly killed by a pack of wolves. This is the only instance where she could be described as a damsel in distress, but the writers shake the idea up a bit. The Beast comes to her aide, saving her from the wolves, but is badly injured and ends up passing out into the snow. She yet again has to step up to the role of the savior, which was traditionally occupied by a male character, and take him back to the castle.

It could be stated that her stepping into the role of the savior, while the men are placed in the essential damsel in distress role, shows her character flaw, that being compassion. She lets her emotions guide her actions, for she took her father’s place out of
love and she rescued the Beast out of emotional obligation. Had she ignored her emotions, she would have never been placed in the castle at all. Her emotions demonstrate one of the few characteristics that she shares with previous Disney heroines. She demonstrates the stereotype that women are compassionate, forgiving and emotional.

However, she does let her emotions guide her, and that is what helps to develop the story. After saving the Beast the first time from possible hypothermia, she helps to nurture the Beast back to health and show a unique trait. Belle is not afraid to speak her mind and talk back to the Beast, having just as much of an attitude as he does at times. As the narrative continues, the Beast is shown to have fallen in love with her, but as the narrator states in the beginning, she has to return his love. In order to impress Belle, the Beast does something no other man had attempted to do. While Gaston tried to impress her with flowers and a wedding proposal in the beginning of the film, the Beast gives her an entire library. He takes the advice of his servants and gives her something she really loves.

Belle doesn’t come out and say that she loves the Beast until the end of the film, but her actions speak for her in most of the scenes near the end of the film. The Beast had shown his love for Belle by giving her back her freedom so she could go find her father, even though he knew giving her up would mean he’d never be human again. She returns to her village and discovers that her father had been trying to get the townspeople to help him return to the castle to save her. Because of this, everyone though that her father was insane and needed to be placed into an asylum. She attempts to prove his sanity by showing the Beast through the magic mirror he gave her as a farewell present, but this
only sparks Gaston and the others to lead a mob to the castle, intent on murdering the Beast.

She and her father are locked within his basement, but saved by Chip, a servant from the castle who had followed her. She rushes to the castle, once again to save the Beast from Gaston’s attack. In one scene, Belle is shown on her horse, which bursts through the Castle doors, looking extremely brave in the shot. She rushes to the rooftop where the scuffle between the two men is taking place. She offers him her hand, but he is stabbed by Gaston before she can pull him up. Gaston falls to his death and she pulls him to safety, but she is too late, for the Beast was mortally wounded. She professes her love for him after he dies and her profession of love is what saves him. His body is transformed back to a human state and his entire castle is washed away from the curse. She was his savior and the savior of all that lived within the castle walls, something that hardly ever takes place. Where the female lead is the hero and the male is the one who is in need of saving.

The issue of social class is barely acknowledged within the film. Other then showing the peasants in the town at the beginning, the film strays away from this. Belle is not a princess; she is the daughter of an inventor. The Beast is a prince, so in theory he would politically need to marry a princess. However, since he has been placed underneath the curse, this becomes of little importance. The narrative deals with the concept of love and not arranged marriages. The Beast falls in love with Belle and it is implied at the end of the film that the two are married.

Earlier Disney films rarely demonstrated the concept of two people falling in love and not worrying about social class. For example, Snow White was a princess who was
mistreated by her step mother and forced to run away for fear for her life. At the end of the film, after being placed into a deep sleep by a poisoned apple, true loves kiss awakens her. Her true love just so happens to be a prince. Both Aurora, from *Sleeping Beauty*, and Ariel, from *The Little Mermaid*, are princesses that marry princes at the end of the film. Though in *Cinderella*, the main character is not a princess. The prince first meets her when she is pretending to be something that she is not; a rich, beautiful lady who is attending the royal ball. Had the prince met Cinderella anywhere other then the ball, in her true form, it would have been unlikely that he would have noticed her at all. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the main heroine was not a princess and her class didn’t prevent her from achieving happiness.

Perhaps the changes in the narrative and character structure to make a more feminine structure helped to attribute to the films success. After the films release, it won a Golden Globe for Best Picture and was nominated for the Best Picture academy award. The film went onto have various sequels and a Broadway musical adaptation. The film could also be viewed as one of the first with female heroine that broke away from the stereotypical model set by the films processors. Whether the changes to the structure of the film helped to achieve success or not, it can not be argued that the film still holds up as one of the most popular films that Disney has released.


