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***Introduction/Statement of Topic:***The lack of mothers in Disney movies has perplexed me for quite some time.  When I was a child watching the films, I could care less about the parents and focused solely on the beautiful Disney princesses.  My favorite Disney princess has always been Ariel, and as much as she was dying to be part of our world, I wanted to be part of hers.  Her single parent household, which was actually an ever expansive oceanic playground, seemed alluring when I was a young girl; however, I lacked the analytical skills to see Disney’s misleading formulaic plot of the motherless princesses falling in love, time and time again, with their prince charmings and how that reinforced negative gender roles.  In these Disney princess movies, when the mothers are absent and the fathers are present, the fathers typically have either very strict rules that create a semi-estranged relationship or the fathers are rather incapable of effectively raising their daughters.  Although children may notice the mothers are not in the movies, they do not truly understand the importance of the mother’s absence.  Focusing solely on the Disney princesses, specifically Ariel, I noticed several things about the majority of the princesses’ lives.  With the exception of Aurora, none of the other five princesses (Ariel, Snow White, Belle, Cinderella, or Jasmine) have birth mothers who appear in the movies.  In The Little Mermaid, Ariel’s father is very strict and she ultimately choses to abandon her family, voice, and drastically alter her appearance in her quest for love.  Ariel’s choices reinforce women’s dependence on men and teach the young girls watching The Little Mermaid that living happily ever after can only happen by finding a husband and spending the rest of their lives as housewives.

Another interesting observation in the Disney princess movies is the princesses have limited contact, if any, with other females.  If the princesses do encounter other females, the females are often portrayed in a negative and mean manner, such as the evil step mother and step sisters we see in Cinderella or the evil queens who attack so many of the helpless, innocent princesses.  Even the animals are friendlier than the new women who are introduced into the plot.  Ariel’s two best friends throughout the film are Flounder and Sebastian, who are both, by no coincidence, male.  This shows females’ reliance and dependence on men and reinforces negative gender roles.  At the end of the Disney princess movies, they all find true love and live happily ever after.  After being surrounded by men for their entire lives and relying solely on their dads or other male heroes, the princesses feel they need a man to complete them and protect them.

As young girls watch these Disney princess films they are subconsciously being told how society expects them to act and what it expects them to look like. These films imply that a failure to successfully be beautiful, thin, and intelligent will result in a lonely life, and more importantly, without a husband to take care of her.  Although these messages may appear discrete, a careful analysis of the plot and characters reveals Disney’s negative reinforcement of gender stereotypes.  Young girls watching The Little Mermaid identify with her struggle to make the metamorphosis from young girl to grown woman and thus feel that Ariel’s man-seeking lifestyle is normal.  I feel that my research will best be presented in a website-format that is geared towards parents.  Every day The Little Mermaid gains new audience members and young girls begin to yearn to break free from their restrictive fins and spread their legs.  Parents may not be fully aware of the subliminal messages the movie is sending to their children, thus a web-site designed for parents seems most suitable to display my research.

**Discussion of Importance:**This project is meaningful to parents of children who are interested in the Disney princess films and older girls that have fond memories watching The Little Mermaid.  When I was little I adored Ariel, and upon completing research for my paper I am beginning to question her ethics as a character and role model for young girls.  My research may provide parents with an entirely new perspective on the film that they never before considered, which may even lead them not allowing their children to watch the film.  In addition, the parents may feel compelled to engage in discussions with their young children about how the children feel after watching these movies.  By educating parents, they will be able to properly educate their children on the sexist undertones of Disney princess films and how to avoid being pigeonholed into gender roles as a result of emulating the protagonists.  This paper will open a lot of parents’ eyes to the reinforcement of negative gender roles in Disney movies through character and plot analysis.  It will show them the way Disney manages to send subtle messages to their children that they may have overlooked even when they were a child and watching the same movies.

**Literature Review:**Suzan Brydon’s article, “Men at the heart of mothering: finding mother in Finding Nemo,”

Christine Holmlund’s article, “Tots to tanks: Walt Disney Presents Feminism for the Family,” and Susan White’s chapter, “Split Skins: Female Agency and Bodily Mutilation in The Little Mermaid,” all acknowledge Disney’s skillful method of depicting women in a certain manner, which reflects their age.  As women are older, they are portrayed as being frumpy, overweight, and unattractive.  Holmlund noticed that the older women in the crime fighting coalition in the North Avenue Irregulars are not “overwhelming beautiful” and “were the very image of the girl/mom next door” (122).  The adolescent princesses and heroines are slender, poised, and very attractive, which compels the young viewers to want to emulate them.  Brydon writes, “Female ‘heroines’ are drawn with delicate strokes of femininity and coquettishness; they have hourglass figures, flawless features and need their men” (131).  In addition, the young female viewers are persuaded to believe this is what females should look like, especially if they wish to find a husband.  The Disney females are always drawn smaller in comparison to the males/heroes, which also reinforces the negative gender roles our society has enforced.

White asserts that Disney movies lead girls to believe that “male ador will be more fulfilling than anything else could possibly be,” which is emphasized in The Little Mermaid when Ariel leaves her family, gives up her voice, and trades in her tail for legs just to be with a man that may or may not love her (191).  White also says, “And here is the danger: even though girls know that happiness in marriage is at best a fifty-fifty proposition, the intoxication of approval and recognition is so heady and so addictive that they will often pursue what they suspect to be a losing battle, at the expense of other opportunities for education and employment,” (191).  Ariel surrenders her voice and her tail in exchange for a chance to be with her crush, Prince Eric.  In the clip from The Little Mermaid provided by Medialiteracyfem, Ursula convinces Ariel that she will be better off without her voice, which implies men do not want an outspoken woman.  Ursula tells Ariel, “You’ll have your looks, your pretty face, and don’t underestimate the importance of body language” (Medialiteracyfem).  In addition to a submissive woman, The Little Mermaid teaches its young viewers that men want beautiful, thin women.  Ariel’s voice represents her intellect and her ability to speak up for herself in a relationship, thus demonstrating her acknowledging her submissive place as a female.  When Ariel gives up her tail, which has been her main mode of transportation for her entire life, she is completely abandoning her current life and accepting to forever be dominated and immobile in a patriarchal world.

**Plan for further research:**To enhance my research paper, I would like to conduct a small-scale research study asking young girls which Disney princess they like and why they like her.  I would also like to ask the girls how they feel about Ariel and how the film, The Little Mermaid, makes them feel upon watching it.  My final research question would ask what the girls would like to do when they get older and do they see themselves getting married.  In addition to conducting a small-scale research study, I would like to re-watch The Little Mermaid and take notes as I watch the film.  As my analytical skills have developed over this semester, I believe I will be able to pick up on more subtle clues on the reinforcement of gender roles throughout the film.  Since I plan to create a website, I will also research movie clips and pictures online that help bolster my argument.  These pictures and clips will be carefully selected and some clips will need to be edited to only show the portion that pertains to my argument.  Lastly, I would like to read Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid (1837)” fairytale to see how Disney has adapted their version from the original.