

2019

Villains, Morality, and Redemption: A Content Analysis of Children's Movies


Iqra Ishaq
iqra_ishaq@my.uri.edu

Creative Commons License

[Creative Commons License](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#).

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog>

 Part of the [Applied Ethics Commons](#), [Criminology Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ishaq, Iqra, "Villains, Morality, and Redemption: A Content Analysis of Children's Movies" (2019). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 707.
<https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/707><https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/707>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at the University of Rhode Island at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu.

Villains, Morality, and Redemption
A Content Analysis of Children's Movies

By Iqra Ishaq

Supervisor: Dr. Megan Parry

Senior Honors Project
Honors Program, Spring 2019
University of Rhode Island

I. BACKGROUND

Since May 2018, I have been a research assistant for Dr. Megan Parry for her project on the depictions of the criminal justice system in children's animated movies. My focus on villains and redemption emerged out of the preliminary findings of Dr. Parry's research, presented to Dean Riley of the College of Arts & Sciences in October 2018.

The importance of this research stems from the influence children's media can have on children's social and moral upbringing. How children's movies depict villains and the criminal justice system can affect the development of their attitudes towards offenders and criminal justice actors.

II. THEORIES OF MEDIA INFLUENCE

This research is based on the following theories of media influences:

- a. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), and
- b. Cultivation Theory (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009).

According to these theories, children's psychosocial development is affected by the media they watch as well as the amount of time spent watching it.

III. PRIOR RESEARCH

Children's media, including books, television shows, and movies, have been analysed for messaging about the following:

- a. Age – focuses on the stereotypical depictions of older characters in children's media as senile or villainous, and considers implications for children's attitudes toward older adults (Bishop & Krause, 1986; Danowski & Robinson, 2012; Kirkland, 2010; Robinson & Anderson, 2006; Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, & Moore, 2007; Zurcher & Robinson, 2018).

- b. Gender & Sexuality – analyzes stereotypical depictions of women, men, girls and boys as well as any changing trends; also analyzes messaging about transgenderism and homosexuality as signalling villainy (Davis, 2006, 2013; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003; Mallan, 2000; Putnam, 2013).
- c. Race & Ethnicity – focuses on linguistic analyses of non-standard American English dialects and accents used by villains (Azad, 2009; Dubrow & Gidney, 1998).
- d. Mental Illness – analyzes how physical and mental illnesses are depicted and/or talked about, and raises concerns about use of stigmatizing language and portrayals of mental illness (Wahl, 2003; Wahl, Wood, Zaveri, Drapalski, & Mann, 2003; Wilson, Nairn, Coverdale, & Panapa, 2000; Lawson & Fouts, 2014).
- e. Death – analyzes how death scenes are depicted and how they vary between protagonists and antagonists (Cox, Garret, & Graham, 2005; Tenzek & Nickels, 2017; Graham, Yuhas, & Roman, 2018).
- f. Demonization – considers how seemingly ‘bad’ behaviour is demonized with no references to the social context, and considers concerns about children’s attitudes toward wrong-doers (Fouts, Callan, Piasentin, & Lawson, 2006).
- g. Justice – analyzes depictions of justice in superhero cartoons, and raises concerns about the level of punitiveness depicted (Kort-Butler, 2013; Martin, 2007).

IV. CURRENT RESEARCH

My research with Dr. Parry focuses on the depictions of villains in children’s movies and the consequences they face for their actions.

- a. Sample: full-length animated movies, rated G or PG, released by Disney, DreamWorks, and Warner Bros. between 2000 and 2018.

- b. Coding: coded for presence of villains, their appearance, morality, motives, crimes committed, and consequences faced.
 - i. Morality coded as good, evil, or grey.
 - ii. Consequences coded for death, official punishment, unofficial punishment, and freedom; also coded for redeemed or unredeemed.

V. RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings about villains' dying, being punished officially or unofficially, or being allowed to go free are analysed for messaging about punitiveness. Finding about villains being redeemed, offering reparations, and/or being forgiven by the protagonists are analysed for implications for rehabilitation, restorative justice, and forgiveness.

VI. REFERENCES

- Azad, S. B. (2009). *Lights, Camera, Accent: Examining Dialect Performance in Recent Children's Animated Films* (Master's Thesis). Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Bishop, J. M. & Krause, D. R. (1984). Depictions of aging and old age on Saturday morning television. *The Gerontologist*, 24, 91–94. doi:10.1093/geront/24.1.91
- Cox, M., Garrett, E., & Graham, J. (2005). Death in Disney Films: Implications for Children's Understanding of Death. *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying*, 50(4), 267-280.
- Danowski, J. & Robinson, T. (2012). The portrayal of older characters in popular children's picture books in the US: A content analysis from 2000 to 2010. *Journal of Children and Media*, 6, 1–18. doi:10.1080/17482798.2011.630741
- Davis, A. M. (2009). *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation*. UK: John Libbey Publishing Ltd.
- Davis, A. M. (2013). *Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains: Men in Disney's Feature Animation*. UK: John Libbey Publishing Ltd.
- Dobrow, J. R. & Gidney, C. L. (1998). The Good, the Bad, and the Foreign: The Use of Dialect in Children's Animated Television. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 557(1), 105–119.
- Fouts, G., Callan, M., Piasentin, K., & Lawson, A. (2006). Demonizing in Children's Television Cartoons and Disney Animated Films. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development*, 37(1), 15-23.

- James A. Graham, Hope Yuhas, & Jessica L. Roman. (2018). Death and Coping Mechanisms in Animated Disney Movies: A Content Analysis of Disney Films (1937–2003) and Disney/Pixar Films (2003–2016). *Social Sciences*, 7(10), 199. doi:10.3390/socsci7100199
- Kirkland, E. (2010). The Politics of Powerpuff: Putting the ‘Girl’ into ‘Girl Power’. *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 5(1): 9-24.
- Kort-Butler, L. (2013). Justice League?: Depictions of Justice in Children’s Superhero Cartoons. *Criminal Justice Review*, 38(1), 50-69.
- Lawson, A., & Fouts, G. (2004). Mental Illness in Disney Animated Films. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 49(5), 310-314.
- Li-Vollmer, M. & LaPointe, M. E. (2003). Gender Transgression and Villainy in Animated Film. *Popular Communication*, 1, 89-109.
- Mallan, K. M. (2000). Witches, Bitches and *Femmes Fatales*: Viewing the Female Grotesque in Children’s Film. *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* 10(1), 26-35.
- Martin, J. (2007). Children's attitudes toward superheroes as a potential indicator of their moral understanding. *Journal of Moral Education*, 36(2), 239-250.
- Morgan, M., Shanahan, J., & Signorielli, N. (2009). Growing Up with Television: Cultivation Processes. In J. Bryant & M. B. Oliver (Eds.), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 34-49). New York/London: Routledge.
- Putnam, A. (2013). Mean Ladies: Transgendered Villains in Disney Films. In J. Cheu (Ed.), *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability* (pp. 147-162). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc.

- Robinson, T. & Anderson, C. (2006). Older Characters in Children's Animated Television Programs: A Content Analysis of Their Portrayal. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(2), 287-304.
- Robinson, T., Callister, M., Magoffin, D. & Moore, J. (2007). The portrayal of older characters in Disney animated films. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 21(3), 203-213.
- Tenzek, K. E., & Nickels, B. M. (2017). End-of-Life in Disney and Pixar Films: An opportunity for Engaging in Difficult Conversation. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*. doi: 10.1177/0030222817726258
- Wahl, O. (2003). Depictions of mental illnesses in children's media. *Journal of Mental Health*, 12(3), 249-258.
- Wahl, O., Wood, A., Zaveri, P., Drapalski, A., & Mann, B. (2003). Mental illness depiction in children's films. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 31(6), 553-560
- Wilson, C., Nairn, R., Coverdale, J., & Panapa, A. (2000). How mental illness is portrayed in children's television. A prospective study. *The British Journal of Psychiatry: The Journal of Mental Science*, 176, 440-443.
- Zurcher, J. & Robinson, T. (2018). From “Bibbid-Bobbidi-Boo” to Scrooge: An update and comparative analysis of the portrayal of older characters in recent Disney animated films. *Journal of Children and Media*, 12(1), 1-15.