



# Frozen

The most feminist animation movie made?

An analysis of Frozen's narrative and characters



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Springboard L6

December, 2019

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# Introduction

In 2013 Frozen hits theaters and becomes one of Disney's wildly successful feature films. In many ways it is an extraordinary work of art: from the short production time compared to other Disney movies (2 years) to the 1.2 billion it made in box office.

But nothing stands out more than it being an example of female empowerment; from the 2 fierce, female lead characters to the first female Disney co-director supervising the whole production and writing the screenplay. A screenplay in which Disney smashed its own created stereotypes that women need a man to save them.

But is Frozen really that diverse and feminist?  
This thesis studies its characters and narrative.

# 1. The importance of gender stereotypes

To study whether or not Frozen is Disney's strongest feminist movie, it's necessary to understand the importance of the character depiction, the story and the influence it might have on viewers. Especially on young viewers.

When children that are not at an age yet to comprehend concepts like gender stereotypes, get in touch with representations of those, they internalize what they see and it can leave them with a lasting impression and impact on how they later look at those concepts [1][2].

For example; when Disney depicts white characters in lead roles and doesn't depict people of color in similar roles, young viewers might internalize white supremacy.

The same applies to a notion of sexism by how both male and female characters are portrayed.

That's why it's important that the story and characters are realistic and diverse representations of real humans.

## 2. Storyline

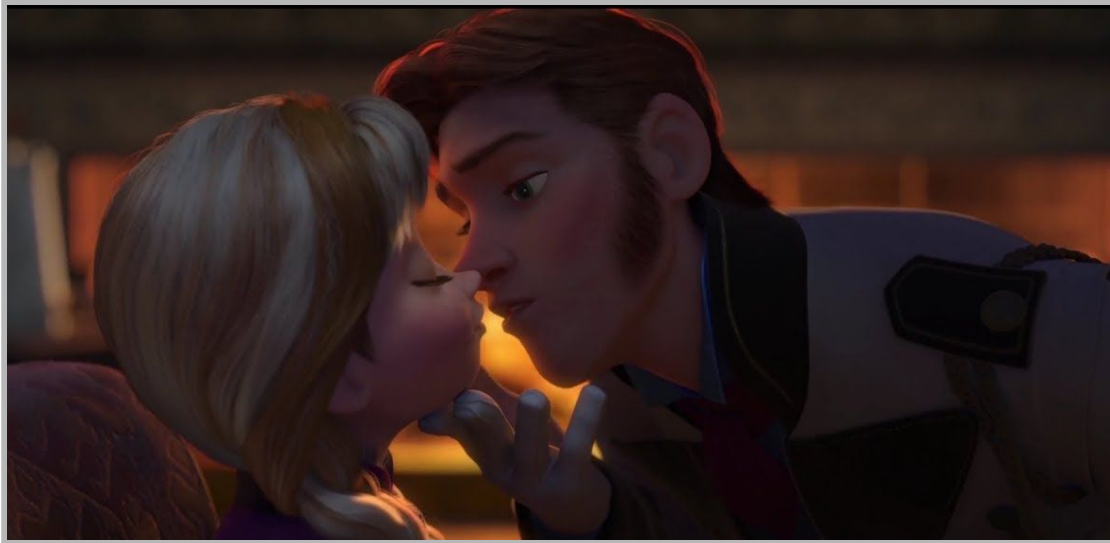
In the first Frozen movie, we see 2 sisters standing up for each other and bravely fighting to save their kingdom from a harsh winter. The eldest (Elsa) flees from the kingdom to protect it and live freely with her powers to turn things into ice. The youngest (Anna) goes after her sister by herself, leaving an evil prince (Hanz) behind in charge of the kingdom. She joins forces with mountaineer Kristoff and snowman Olaf to find her sister and bring her back. Upon finding Elsa, Anna gets hit by her powers and turns into ice. When they return to the kingdom, Hanz turns out to be the villain and the love that can eventually save Anna, is the love of her sister.

### Desire of romance and to find love

In every movie, Disney makes it very clear early on what the characters want to achieve. It helps the young viewers understand what to expect and which ending to cheer on.

15 min into Frozen Anna sings about her desire to find true love. Even though the main selling point of the movie is sister love and the depiction of women that do not need a man to save them, Anna clearly seems to desire one.

Disney even winks at its own created stereotypes. When Anna is turning into ice and needs to be saved, animators use *anticipation* to make viewers believe Prince Hanz will save Anna by kissing her. But he doesn't do so and a plot twist is revealed. Hanz turns out to be the villain.



Throughout the movie, the animators allude to who Anna's true love is by clever usage of *staging* and Anna looking longingly to Kristoff.



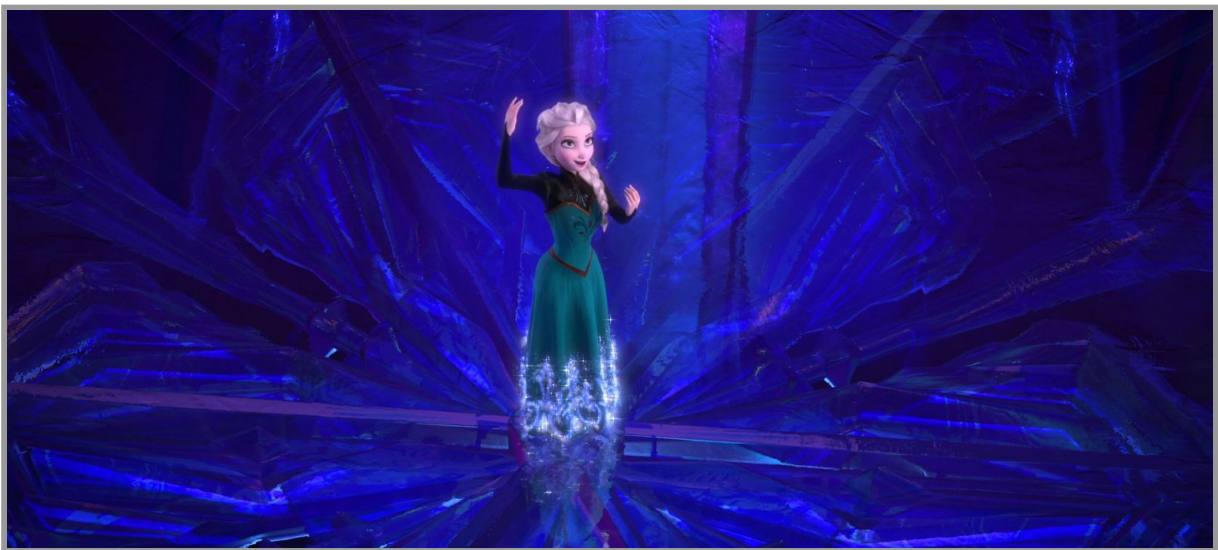


The staging of these shots also portray Anna in a submissive, lower position than men, even when she's in the boat and could be on the same eye level she's bent over and positioned lower than Hanz. The eye of the viewer is clearly guided from the woman to the men in a diagonal line.



## Taking responsibility

When Elsa her ice powers are revealed to the people of the Kingdom, she flees to the mountains to live alone in an ice castle. Although this is a relatable storyline and reveals Elsa's complex character, she could have taken responsibility for her actions. On top of that, in the mountains she 'lets go' of expectations and turns into her true self. She does so by building a castle, decorating it and changing clothes and hairstyles in a celebratory fashion. These are stereotypical depictions of women and what freedom means to them.



### 3. Depiction of the characters

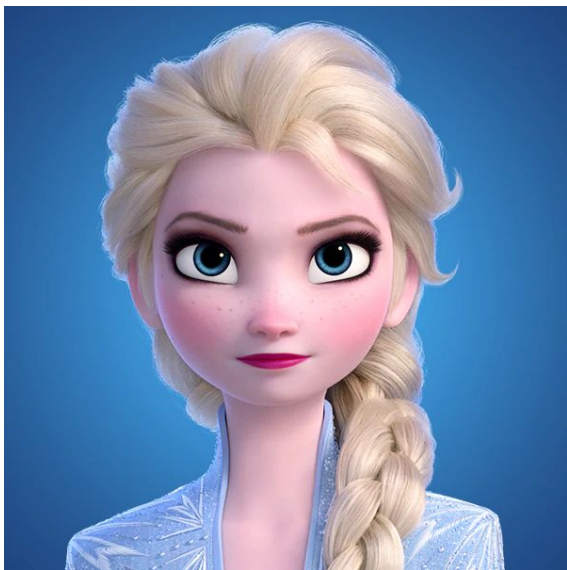
#### Gender of the characters

Frozen brings a story that has hardly been seen from Disney; 2 female lead characters standing up for each other. A study from USC Annenberg shows that 17% of animated movies depict a female lead or co-lead [3]. With 2 female leads Frozen scores exceptionally well.

#### Physical appearance

From a physical appearance point of view, the characters are both white, skinny, blue eyed and flawless. A study from 2018 with young Disney watchers in the UK, shows that 74% feels comfortable with a movie depicting an ethnic minority and 52% feels comfortable with depicting an overweight character [4], yet we see none of this in Frozen.

If we study the characters more closely, we notice that Disney is really trying to *appeal* to the audience. The sisters come close to resembling barbie and are extremely beautiful.



Walt Disney Studios



Mattel



Disney is making the characters flawless by using *exaggeration*. The eyes of the female characters are too big and their waists too small for instance.



(Brantz, 2014) [5]

Another unrealistic exaggeration that helps to appeal to the audience and create sympathy is the similarities in appearance between both sisters. Biologically it's very unlikely that the shape of face, nose, eyebrows and lips of siblings that are not identical twins are similar.



Dimorphism is ever present in Frozen. It's common in Disney movies that women have big eyes and tiny hands. This refers to femininity. Hands of women compared to the hands of portrayed men are not proportional, especially when the characters are in a romantic relationship.



Even though the lead male characters have more normal sized eyes, dimorphism happens in their characters as well. Kristoff has Herculean measurements and is about twice the size of Anna which isn't realistic. Men are represented with bodies that unproportionally look stronger than female bodies.



## Identity

Frozen depicts princesses born into wealth, but fighting and standing up for themselves. Compared to the portrayal of female characters in the past by Disney, a lot of progress has been made. The first wave of Disney-princesses were notorious housewives, doing household chores and relying on a male character to save them. Cinderella, Snow White and Sleeping Beauty to name a few. The next wave of princesses portrayed rebellious, independent women who gave up personal character traits and intelligence to win the love of a man. The little mermaid for instance. In Frozen the women don't need men to save them, they are merely their to guide them.

## Personality

Writer and co-director Jennifer Lee, wanted to show characters that have flaws. Yet these flaws seem more like clumsiness than something contributing to the plot of the story. It's not something Anna has to overcome and is challenging her. It's an example of how Disney want to make the characters relatable and approachable. But it's not contributing to a realistic image of women.

One example is when Anna's tries to climb a mountain without adequate gear for instance. Through *stretching* they exaggerate her clumsiness while Kristoff is watching her fail.



## Sexuality

There's speculation that Elsa hiding her ice powers and revealing those later in the movie, is a metaphor for coming out.

Similarly, the writers make insinuations that Oaken is gay through *secondary action* of how Oaken moves his hands, the pink color in his sweater, the way he speaks and the man in the sauna who could refer to his husband.



The pro-queer messaging and speculation around sexuality is a familiar Disney concept. Disney has long held a progressive attitude towards LGBTQ-themes. From showing it's ok to be different and coming out (Dumbo flapping his ears), to showcasing crossdressing (Ursula in the Little Mermaid) to the rejection of the traditional marriage patterns (Belle in Beauty and the Beast refusing Gaston) it has touched upon it in different ways and Frozen follows that trend [6].

## 4. Influence of female screenwriters & directors

*“The guys I work with now, they do want that change because they see it makes our films better. It challenges the storytelling, makes the days richer.”*

- Jennifer Lee (Dowd, 2019) [7]

The storywriter(s) and director(s) define the narrative and characters and thus have an impact on the representation of gender. Additionally, the narrative of an animation movie matters to its success. In 1983 Barry R. Litman studied 125 films to determine the success criteria of movies. Three elements predict successful movies: high quality stories, the release date and marketing [8].

Frozen was written and co-directed by Jennifer Lee, who later became Disney's first chief creative officer following up John Lasseter. She joined the Frozen-crew when the story was stuck and became co-director after a couple of months of heavy involvement. Lee became the first female to direct a feature length movie at Disney. And a lot of the success of Frozen is attributed to her contributions.

### Bringing in personal experiences

Lee brought her own experience and views into the story. The dynamics between Anna and Elsa are based off the experiences Lee had with her sister and daughter. Lee is driven by showing the world as it is, through Disney movies.

*“Lee isn't interested in any more Prince Charming characters who simply look good and show up at the right time. She long ago grew weary of Hollywood movies where the female characters were there either for a sexual reason or to reflect what's at stake for the male characters. She is more inspired by the snappy back and forth of saucy women and the men who enjoy them on Turner Classic Movies”* (Shuler, 2019) [9].

Lee's input to the story of Frozen shows that a diverse cast brings in multiple different viewpoints and experiences, which equals a more realistic world view that a broader audience can relate to. The more viewers can relate to a story, the more potential it has to become a box office success.

## History of women in animation studios

Having a woman write and co-direct a full feature film is rare in the animation industry. Research from June 2019 shows that only 9% of writers and 3% of animated film directors are female. Out of a 120 top animation movie sample, only 5 were directed by women. A culture of homophily and lack of belonging, being perceived as less ambitious and being undervalued all obstruct women from holding leadership positions.[3]

With Frozen Disney made a first step in the right direction and Disney CEO Bob Iger recently stated that

*“40% of Disney Studios’ upcoming movie slate is being directed by women and we are striving for more!”* (Bui, 2018) [10].

Iger openly striving for diversity, reminds of a Walt Disney himself who hired women and stated in 1941, 72 years before Frozen hit the market;

*“The girl artists have the right to expect the same chances for advancement as men, and I honestly believe that they may eventually contribute something to this business that men never would or could”* (Holst, 2019) [11].

There’s controversy though how much women were welcome at Disney during the Golden Age. Rejection letters to women ‘because women do not do creative work’ on one side, but a list of successful women on the other. Bianca Majolie, for instance, worked in the story department and worked on Pinnochio, Fantasia and Dumbo in different departments since 1940.[11] Additionally, the first idea to make Frozen, based on The Snow Queen from Hans Christian Andersen, was developed in 1938 and written by Mary Goodrich.[12]

The rest of the industry is catching up on female leaders in animation studios as well and even faster than Disney. When Disney hired their first female creative officer, Pixar was already hiring its second female feature director.[13]

## Conclusion

With Frozen a lot of pro-female elements came together at once; from the story that depicts 2 independent, flawed female characters that do not need a man to save them, to a woman defying the odds and writing a relatable story as well as directing the feature film and doing such an amazing job that the movie gets several awards for best animation. These elements combined shine a spotlight on the power that women have and set an example against gender stereotyping for the generations to come. In that regards Frozen is successful in being a feminist movie.

But stating Frozen is the *most* feminist animation movie ever made is denying the history of all fierce men and women who paved the path that Jennifer Lee successfully built on top of. From the writers that advocated for LGBTQ-elements in older Disney movies to the fierce female animators during the Golden Age that fought against the prejudice from their male counterparts.

Additionally, there's still a long way to go to portray a real and diverse representation of humans and society, both in the story as well as visually. Not only in Frozen and Disney, but in the animation industry in general.

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