

'Conceal, Don't Feel, Don't Let Them Know':  
A Critical Analysis of the Representation of  
Disability in Disney Animated Films

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## **Abstract**

This thesis critically analyses how disability is portrayed in Disney animated films. It specifically examines representations of impairment and disability from the perspective of disability studies which views disability as something created by barriers in society. In order to map the frequency as well as how and whether representations of impairment and disability have changed over time, I conducted a content analysis of all 56 Disney animated films from 1937 to 2016 for this study. Then, using themes from the data pertaining to the representation of disability, I conducted film analysis on a subset of the films in order to narrow my analysis. These themes are disability as a symbol of evil, disability as a problem to overcome and disability as a magical power. The findings from the study show that there are a wide range of characters with impairments in Disney animated films without any disabling aspect imposed on top of them. However, there are numerous characters who are portrayed in traditional and stereotypical ways contributing to the negative imagery associated with disability. Therefore, in this thesis, I argue that there is progression from traditional depictions where disability is used as a plot device towards more realistic and affirmative representations where disability becomes part of a character's identity rather than existing as their defining feature.

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## **Declaration**

I, Jessica Gibson, declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and that I am the sole author. This work has not been previously presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.

**Signed:** J. J. Gibson

**Date:** 02/02/2023

# **1. Chapter One – A Critical Analysis of Disability in Disney Animated Films**

## **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis focuses on the representation of disability in Disney animated films. Specifically, it analyses depictions of impairment and disability from a disability studies perspective. For this study, I conducted a content analysis of all 56 Disney animated films from 1937 to 2016 to map how often impairment and disability are represented, how they are portrayed and whether there have been changes over time in the representations. I then focused on a selection of the films in more detail by conducting film analysis according to themes from the data relating to the representation of disability.

I make the distinction between impairment and disability as they are different, but related, terms deployed in disability studies to illustrate that disability is a social and cultural construct imposed on top of people's impairments. Impairment is an individual's condition, whereas disability is the social construct surrounding that condition caused by societal barriers such as environment and attitudes (Oliver, 2013). The social construction of disability is also known as the social model of disability and is the theoretical underpinning for this research. However, I also acknowledge there are some weaknesses to the social model which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Therefore, I use the social model as the foundation of my work but also build on it to define disability as a social *and* cultural construct. In this way, I use disability as a broad term that describes the treatment by society towards those who diverge from normalcy.

I adopt feminist disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (2002) understanding of disability as 'ideological categories as

varied as sick, deformed, crazy, ugly, old, maimed, afflicted, mad, abnormal, or debilitated – all of which disadvantage people by devaluing bodies that do not conform to cultural standards’ (p. 5). Moreover, I agree that disability is ‘a prism through which one can gain a broader understanding of society and human experience’ (Linton, 1998, p. 118). These views and definitions of disability are essential to how disability representations are analysed throughout this thesis.

By analysing disability representation in Disney animated films, I have drawn on fundamental theories from cultural disability studies, such as *narrative prosthesis* (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000), which describes the pervasive reliance upon disability as a metaphor and plot device throughout history. I have also utilised the concept of *normalcy* (Davis, 1995), which emphasises that the problem is not the disabled person, but the way normalcy is constructed in society which views disability as a problem as it deviates from the norm. Furthermore, I include but also move beyond explicit representations of impairment and disability that can easily be identified, such as characters with missing limbs or who use a wheelchair, to uncover ‘examples where the text does not explicitly name a particular impairment or condition, but where disability structures the logic of the narrative or ways of seeing and knowing in the text,’ (Hall, 2020, p. 2) such as disability encoded as magical powers where disability is depicted as a social construct. Note here that Hall makes the distinction between impairment and disability referring to impairment as the individual’s condition whereas disability is a broader term to describe the social and cultural notions attached to impairment but moving far beyond it. These are valuable theories that allowed me to uncover narratives that require a disability studies and a social model lens to be identified. As cultural disability studies scholar David Bolt (2015) asserts:

The study of culture does indeed enrich our understanding of disability...

however we choose to approach disability, the fact remains that people who have impairments...are frequently keyed to a metanarrative by which all is supposedly explained. (p. 293)

Indeed, it is both people with and without impairments that are keying disabled people to these narratives. Therefore, there is a critical need to analyse cultural representations to uncover how they can contribute to the narratives of disability that dominate understandings in society and culture. By exploring depictions of characters whose disability is used as a plot device or appears in a story as social commentary exemplifying the social model of disability, I show that there is a large frequency of impairment and disability in Disney animated films. In addition, I have found that many of these representations of disability in Disney animated films pertain to traditional stereotypes of disability which are common in literature and media. Nevertheless, I argue that there is progress in Disney's representations of disability, which move from the traditional, moral and medical views of disability towards portraying disability as a social construct, lived experience and identity. In doing so, the progression of disability representation shows characters treated negatively by others and their journey of acceptance within themselves and from society without having to overcome or fix their impairments. In this way, there are progressive representations of disability in Disney animated films that reflect the issues in society rather than the individual and develop into an affirmative identity. By doing this, these films have the potential to provide didactic narratives on how to treat those who are different.

## **1.2 The Importance of Studying Disney**

The Walt Disney Company is one of the largest multimedia conglomerates in the world. Therefore, it is important to analyse the company for how it functions and what its products represent. As Janet Wasko (2020) claims, 'it is important to consider the Disney phenomenon seriously and to insist that it is a legitimate focus point for cultural and social analysis' (p. 4).

The Walt Disney Company continues to expand and diversify its studios, TV media networks, consumer products and entertainment theme parks with recent acquisitions of Pixar Animation Studio in 2006, Marvel Studios in 2009, Lucasfilm in 2012, and 20th Century Studios in 2019 allowing them to dominate the markets. It also now occupies a strong position in the streaming service landscape thanks to its own service, Disney Plus which was released in November 2019 and surpassed 152 million subscribers in July 2022 (Palmer, 2022). This shows that Disney products are accessed at a substantial and far-reaching level. Unfortunately, every aspect of the Walt Disney Company cannot be discussed or analysed in a single thesis. Therefore, I focused on animated films for this research. By concentrating on animated films, this research takes as inspiration and further supports Henry Giroux and Grace Pollock's (2010) claim that:

The educational relevance of animated films makes it all the more necessary to move beyond treating these films as transparent entertainment and to question the diverse, often contradictory, messages that constitute Disney's worldview. (p. 92)

Disney's animated films remain one of the company's primary entertainment outputs. They are, arguably, the most relevant to the audience's identification of the classic Disney brand through the characters, narratives, style, and themes that are used (Wasko, 2020). Furthermore, they are ubiquitous in children's culture as 'generations of

children have learned from Disney films [and] Disney's teaching machine now shape the identities of youth from infancy to the teenage years' (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 92). This suggests the substantial influence that Disney can potentially have on its audience. Many argue that Disney can be viewed as a site of inquiry that, as a powerful pedagogical tool, has significant power to shape our lives, whether as fans of Disney or as educators, parents, or consumers (Davis, 2019; Sandlin & Garlen, 2016, 2017). Indeed, audience research indicates there is a global reach of Disney animated films. For instance, the Global Disney Audience Project (Wasko et al., 2001) found that 98% of participants who took part in the audience research project from 18 countries had seen a Disney film, which indicates the global presence of the Disney brand. Therefore, Disney products have the potential to influence our views on specific concepts, including protected characteristics such as disability. As Jennifer Sandlin and Julie Garlen (2017) claim:

Disney is a major cultural force shaping conceptions of family values, gender, sexuality, race, class, ethnicity, "Americanness," childhood, pleasure, entertainment, education, and community and must be recognized as having profound potential to affect how we think, learn, and live. (p. 17)

Interestingly, this quotation does not mention disability. This quotation and other literature reviewed in the next chapter reveals the lack of critical attention given to disability representation in Disney studies scholarship and when analysing Disney products, including animated films. My thesis, therefore, argues for the importance of interrogating the depiction of disability in Disney animated films to highlight how disability is often presented in specific, often stereotypical, ways. By doing so, I apply a disability studies lens to reveal the numerous ways in which disability is portrayed in Disney animated films.

## **1.3 Research Aim and Questions**

### **1.3.1 Aim**

The primary aim of this research was to critically analyse the representation of impairment and disability in Disney animated films from 1937 to 2016. By doing this research, I reveal the frequency of impairment and disability within Disney animated films and the numerous ways in which disability is portrayed.

### **1.3.2 Research Questions**

- 1) How many characters have an impairment and/or disability in Disney animated films from 1937 to 2016?
- 2) In what ways are impairment and/or disability represented in Disney animated films?
- 3) Have these representations changed over time?
  - a. If so, how?

## **1.4 The Importance of Language: Impairment and Disability**

Language plays a vital role in disability studies because of how disability is understood and how disabled people identify themselves. Language is powerful and impacts the lives of disabled people (Titchkosky, 2009). There are numerous terminology preferences which differ around the world and depend on academic discipline, background and personal experience (Mallet & Slater, 2014). In the UK, through the social model of disability, a distinction between impairment and disability is made to illustrate how people with impairments are disabled by society. From this, the phrase *person with an impairment* and *disabled person* are used to show that a person has an impairment and becomes disabled by society (Oliver, 2013). This has enabled disabled people to highlight the societal

problems they face and for disability to be considered an identity category alongside gender, sexuality and race. Colin Barnes (1992) notes that this shift in terminology highlighted the oppression that people with impairments faced.

On the other hand, disability studies scholars in the US often prefer the term *people with disabilities*, which focuses on the person before the disability and is known as *person-first language*. These two preferences, the UK versus the US, have created debates on the best terminology to describe disability. Furthermore, *people with disabilities* often refers to disability and impairment collectively, which contrasts with the UK social model distinction, which explicitly states the difference between impairment and disability (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2018).

For this research project, I chose to use the phrase 'person or character with an impairment' and 'disabled person or character' to highlight the separation of disability from impairment. In doing so, I show that a person or character with an impairment becomes disabled by society, following the distinction identified in the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013). However, I extend the definition of disability to attend to the work in critical and cultural disability studies that describes disability as a broad category, including not only medical conditions but also bodily differences. This is what Rosemary Garland-Thomson (2002) asserts when she states, 'the disability system excludes the kinds of bodily forms, functions, impairments, changes, or ambiguities that call into question our cultural fantasy of the body as a neutral, compliant instrument of some transcendent will' (p. 5). Therefore, I adopt the terminology that is foundational to the social model of disability as my research aligns with the social construction view of disability. But I also broaden the definition of disability to move through and beyond the social model to align with cultural disability studies.



## **1.5 Origin of Research Topic**

In this section, I discuss personal aspects of my life that have influenced the development of my research topic in disability studies and Disney studies. Firstly, I acknowledge that my research is subjective because my position as a researcher is influenced by my viewpoint, perspectives, values, and experiences. In doing so, I adopt a reflexive approach to the research so that I can acknowledge my prior experiences and beliefs that influence how I analyse representations of disability. I believe a reflexive approach is essential and important so that my values relating to disability themes and Disney are not only clear to the reader but can also enhance the findings. At the same time, I also recognise my privileges as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, university-educated woman living in the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, as I will soon discuss, I believe I am well situated to explore disability representation in Disney animated films critically.

I discovered the social model of disability during my undergraduate degree where I completed my studies in childhood studies and disability studies at Northumbria University. This has positively impacted my academic work as well as my personal life. It was also a pivotal moment as I could reconsider disability as a social construct, created and caused by barriers in society such as inaccessibility of places and spaces, lack of opportunity, and negative, discriminatory attitudes rather than it being defined as simply a medical problem that must be fixed. The social model of disability had such an impact on me that it motivated me to pursue further studies and carry out this PhD in Education. It continues to be the theoretical foundation of my research and how I conceptualise disability to this day. The social model of disability has opened my eyes to many of the barriers in society that cause people with impairments to become disabled including accessibility issues in the environment and negative

language about disability and toward disabled people in the media. Throughout my time studying disability studies during my undergraduate degree and doctorate studies, I have also learnt about the theories and models that help contextualise impairment experiences that the social model does not address, including the affirmation model (Cameron, 2014b; Swain et al., 2014) and impairment effects (Thomas, 1999, 2019) which I discuss in more detail in *Chapter Two - Literature Review on Disability Studies and Disney Studies*. In addition, I have learnt about cultural disability studies and several theories from the field, including narrative prosthesis (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000) and the concept of normalcy (Davis, 1995), which have enabled me to contextualise disability representation in popular culture. Once I started to apply this knowledge to literature, film and popular culture, I became aware of the dominant images of disability that were being shown.

I completed my undergraduate dissertation on representations of disability in film and conducted participatory research with students, comparing findings between students from disability studies and non-disability studies backgrounds. This provided evidence that there were many dominant stereotypes in films, but they were often not recognised fully without the knowledge and lens of disability studies. After my undergraduate degree, my personal experience with mental health led me to complete a master's in psychology. Studying for this was a valuable experience; however, I found myself returning to certain aspects of disability studies that were influential to me. Because of this, I pursued this PhD in Education with a specific focus on disability studies, returning to my undergraduate dissertation topic but narrowing my focus from film to Disney animated films.

My experience with mental health, specifically anxiety, has provided a helpful perspective when contextualising the distinction between

impairment and disability. As I support the foundational view of disability as a social construct, I am also aware of and influenced by critical realist perspectives (Shakespeare, 2014). This means that although I agree that disability, in many cases and situations, is caused by social barriers, impairment exists independently of the socially constructed understandings of disability. The theory of impairment effects (Thomas, 2014) – which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter was critical in this regard, to acknowledge that impairment can be disabling on its own. If all social barriers were eradicated, people with impairments would still experience pain, fatigue, and mental health problems. Therefore, the social model can only go so far in improving disabled people's lives. This was crucial for my understanding but also frustrating as the social model of disability did not provide all the answers for every situation. In my own experience, I have not encountered a disabling society, and many people with non-visible impairments do not. However, the experience of nausea, fatigue and panic attacks are still disabling to me.

On the other hand, my mother now has limited mobility due to nerve damage. Therefore, she experiences both impairment effects *and* disability. On a daily basis, she struggles with fatigue and pain, which require medication to ease the strength of her impairment effects. She also uses a wheelchair for mobility; therefore, she needs the environment to be accessible. These two personal experiences illustrate the ambiguity of disability. Every individual will experience impairment and disability differently, whether it is pain from a long-term condition or access issues because a building has not provided a ramp or handrail. Nevertheless, I believe that these experiences, both my mental health and my mother's physical impairments, have enabled me to understand and theorise

disability in a more nuanced way not only in academia but also my personal life.

Additionally, as a young child growing up in the 90s, I remember watching Disney films on home videos. I would visit my grandparents' house every Sunday and watch *Mary Poppins* and *The Jungle Book* on repeat. Like many young girls, I also watched *The Little Mermaid* countless times. I was fortunate to visit the Walt Disney World theme parks in Florida from an early age. I vividly remember one of my first visits where I met Mickey Mouse and the characters from Winnie the Pooh, saw Cinderella Castle and rode my first roller coaster. Since then, I continued going to the parks throughout my childhood and to the present day with my mother, brother, sister as well as my extended family (on several trips, there were fifteen of us, including three people in wheelchairs!). These trips have significantly impacted my identity as a fan of popular culture, theme parks and particularly Disney. And now that I am an adult Disney fan, I continue taking trips to the parks. However, these are now through different perspectives: being an aca-fan and through the lens of disability.

At the crux of my research interests is disability representation in Disney animated films. The idea for this occurred during a trip to Walt Disney World in 2016 when my mother required a wheelchair for the first time and has done ever since. After years of visiting the parks through an able-bodied lens, my family and I were now accessing the parks from a different perspective: disability. Fortunately, the Walt Disney World theme parks are very accessible for wheelchair users. However, after years of being a fan of Disney, I was now curious to know how accessible Disney parks were for all types of impairments and how disability is portrayed in their films. For example, I knew the villain Captain Hook had a missing limb, and Snow White featured seven dwarfs, who are shown as cute and

childlike. So, I wondered what these depictions would mean when interpreted through the lens of disability studies. In addition, I questioned how many characters had physical impairments and if there were any with mental health problems.

I identify as an *aca-fan* which is a term popularised to describe an academic who self-identifies as a member of a specific fandom (Jenkins, 2012). Paul Booth and Rebecca Williams (2021) define an *aca-fan* as an individual 'who is able to occupy the spaces of both academia and fandom and speak authoritatively on both' (p. 4). In addition, my numerous trips to the Disney parks have allowed me to celebrate my identity as a Disney fan and experience located transmedia, where fans can immerse themselves in their favourite films through attractions and rides (Williams, 2020). Being a critical fan is also affirmed by Sandlin and Garlen (2016), who claim their own stance in their research on Disney studies stating:

While we believe that our acknowledgement of Disney's pleasures makes possible a form of critique that recognizes the viewers as an agentic individual who can both appreciate and critically analyze a cultural text, it is critique nonetheless, which might raise eyebrows and ire among devoted Disney fans who do not necessarily want to engage Disney in these critical ways or among academics who do not take the study of Disney seriously. This is the risk we are willing to take. (p. 2)

And indeed, it is the risk that I was willing to take too. On several occasions, I have questioned my position between being a Disney fan and critiquing it simultaneously. Moreover, I have often found it challenging to explain my research. People have found it hard to believe that I can study Disney films, and academics have not taken Disney studies seriously. Alongside this, I have had to explore my identity within disability studies.

I have drawn upon my own mental health experiences and my mother's physical impairments, including using a wheelchair, to understand disability as a social and cultural construct in addition to recognising impairment effects. Nevertheless, I hope that by discussing my background concerning Disney and disability, this has justified my position in both fields.

## **1.6 Thesis Structure**

### **1.6.1 Chapter Two - Literature Review on Disability Studies and Disney Studies**

In the chapter that follows, chapter two, I conduct a review of literature on disability studies and Disney studies. Firstly, I provide an overview of the development of disability studies and cultural disability studies, as well as literature on the models of disability (namely, the medical, social, affirmation and cultural), disability theory and literature relating to cultural representations in film. Secondly, I provide an overview of Disney studies with key literature on the importance of studying Disney, the Disneyfication of fairy tales, and studies that have focused on representation in Disney animated films. Finally, I discuss key literature and studies that have analysed the representation of disability in Disney films. This literature review highlights the gaps to justify this study's rationale.

### **1.6.2 Chapter Three – Methodology: A Critical Analysis of the Representation of Disability in Disney Animated Films (1937 – 2016)**

In chapter three, I provide an overview of the methodology utilised for this study. This includes the aim, rationale, my research position, research questions, and a discussion on summative content analysis and

film analysis and why they were chosen as the research methods for this study alongside related literature. I also discuss the development of the codebook and the coding process. From this, I also explain the justification for conducting a content analysis on all Disney animated films (1937 - 2016) and the need for further film analysis on specific films that were particularly relevant to aspects of disability representation in the data.

### **1.6.3 Chapter Four – Content Analysis Findings of Disney Animated Films (1937 – 2016)**

In chapter four, I present the findings from the summative content analysis where I watched and coded 56 films, from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *Moana* (2016), for characters with impairments and disability. In doing so, I identified the frequency of impairment and disability on the surface level. I also attended to the latent content by interpreting the meanings of specific representations of disability that required a disability studies lens. In this chapter, I present numerical descriptive data about the characters with impairments and disability, including characters' demographics and how disability is portrayed and used in the narratives. Following the findings in this chapter, I chose to focus on key themes and aspects relating to disability that arose from data analysis in more detail. These are the focus of the following three chapters where I explore disability as evil in chapter five, disability as otherness, overcoming and acceptance in chapter six and disability as a magical power, exclusion and affirmation in chapter seven.

### **1.6.4 Chapter Five - Disability as a Symbol, Cause and Subversion of Evil in *The Lion King*, *Peter Pan*, *Treasure Planet*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent***

In chapter five, I discuss the use of disability concerning four Disney villains: Scar in *The Lion King* (1994), Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* (1953), John Silver in *Treasure Planet* (2002) and Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and *Maleficent* (2014). In doing so, I reveal how disability is used frequently as a symbol of evil. I argue that there is a gender divide; male characters are depicted with physical impairments, whereas female villains are portrayed with traits associated with mental impairments. I explore how disability is used as a symbol of evil for Scar in *The Lion King*, a cause of evil for Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* and a subversion of evil for John Silver in *Treasure Planet*. By contrast, I also explore the female villain Maleficent to show how her villainy is associated with depictions of mental health conditions. In addition, I look at the live-action retelling *Maleficent*, to argue how it provides a backstory for a modern audience that addresses mental health conditions and consequently depicts disability as a social construct. In conclusion, I argue that there is progression towards more realistic and multifaceted portrayals of disability in the villains, particularly with John Silver as an anti-villain and the development of Maleficent's backstory which portrays disability as a social construct and shows her evolution from a flat evil villain into a sympathetic character.

#### **1.6.4 Chapter Six - Otherness, Overcoming and Acceptance: Disability as a Temporary Problem and Cause of Social Exclusion in *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame***

In chapter six, I analyse the representation of the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) to explore how aspects of disability are associated with otherness, overcoming and acceptance. Firstly, I show how disability can be viewed through the moral model of disability in



*Beauty and the Beast*, where physical impairment is used as a punishment. By the film's end, the prince transforms back into a human, reinforcing common depictions of disability as something to overcome. Disability is also a temporary curse in *The Little Mermaid* as it manifests when Ariel gives up her voice to become human. In *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*, I demonstrate how the narrative arc involves impairment as a temporary inconvenience, and normalcy is only restored at the end of the film through transformation. Finally, I discuss Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to show how he is mistreated because of his physical impairments. I argue that the film progresses the representation of disability by showing the role that society plays in the disablement of people with impairments without relying on the disabled character to overcome their impairment. However, I also discuss how Quasimodo is not given a romantic happy ending which both the Beast and Ariel obtain at the end of their journeys following a transformation.

#### **1.6.5 Chapter Seven - From Exclusion to Affirmation: Disability as a Magical Power in *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen***

In chapter seven, I focus on two films: *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013), to explore how disability is encoded as a magical power. In doing so, I illustrate how Vanellope from *Wreck-It Ralph* and Elsa from *Frozen* have magical powers which cause others to treat them negatively. However, through their journey of self-acceptance and confidence, they become accepted by others without having to overcome or fix their powers. This provides progressive depictions of disability where the social and affirmation models is portrayed. I demonstrate this mainly through the treatment of others towards Vanellope's glitch and Elsa's ice powers. I argue that Elsa's character is more developed than Vanellope's and therefore, provides a richer example of disability. As a result, I analysed

the treatment of Elsa in detail as well as other aspects of her character including queerness, subversion of narrative prosthesis, and development from a villainous character. I conclude that these two films show progressive depictions of disability as a lived experience.

### **1.6.6 Chapter Eight – Conclusion**

In chapter eight I present the conclusion of this study where I discuss the overall findings arguing that there is an improvement in the representation of impairment and disability in Disney animated films. However, I also discuss how several representations require a disability studies lens and therefore may not be read in the same way by all viewers. I also discuss the contribution this study will make to disability studies and Disney studies in addition to the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

## **2. Chapter Two - Literature Review on Disability Studies and Disney Studies**

### **2.1 Introduction**

My research is situated in both disability studies and Disney studies. Therefore, in this chapter, I introduce the key theories that have influenced the field of disability studies and then turn to the literature on Disney studies. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, this literature review continues to demonstrate the importance of interrogating representations of disability for equality and social justice, in addition to the need for studying Disney because of its social, political, and cultural power as one of the largest media conglomerates in the world (Wasko, 2020). I discuss both fields in detail to demonstrate the importance of critically analysing representations of disability in Disney animated films through relevant theory and literature.

Two main themes emerged when reviewing the literature in disability studies and Disney studies. Firstly, in disability studies, disability is often stereotyped or misrepresented in film, literature, and media (Barnes, 1992; Chivers & Markotić, 2010; Jeffress, 2021; Longmore, 2003). Too often, it is used as a plot device where disability is fixed, overcome or used as a metaphor for evil, humour or portrayed as a supercrip, rather than being part of a character's identity (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). And secondly, in Disney studies, there has been little attention given to the representation of disability, specifically in comparison to other protected characteristics. Instead, scholars have predominantly focused on gender (Davis, 2006, 2014; England et al., 2011; Wiersma, 2000), feminism (Davis, 2005; Frasl, 2018; Muir, 2022), race/ethnicity (Brode, 2005; Cheu, 2013; Faherty, 2001; Lugo-Lugo &

Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009; Willets, 2013), age (Atkinson, 2017) and sexuality (Griffin, 2000; Junn, 1997; Towbin et al., 2004).

In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the history of disability studies written primarily chronologically. I have done this as I believe it is important to contextualise how disability studies developed, firstly in the UK as a social science discipline and developing beyond this to focus on cultural approaches of disability, enabling the development of cultural disability studies. To do this, I introduce the key models of disability namely the medical, social, affirmation and cultural models, and explore relevant theories and literature from the field in relation to representation. I then narrow my focus by examining the literature on disability representation in film, including common stereotypes that appear in cultural representations as well as disability representation in fairy tales. Next, I turn to Disney studies, where I have discussed key literature, including scholars who have explored the importance of studying Disney and literature that has focused on representation in Disney animated films. I also discuss fairy tales because of their relevance to Disney; they are integral to their films, products, and brand (Wasko, 2020). At the end of this chapter, I look at literature that has analysed disability representation in Disney and discuss the research gaps I believe my thesis will contribute to in both the field of disability studies and Disney studies. The theoretical perspectives and concepts gathered in this chapter have helped inform my ontological position as a researcher and the perspective I have conducted my analyses, which are discussed in the following chapters.

## **2.2 Disability Studies: Overview, Models and Theory**

Disability studies, as an academic discipline, developed in the 1980s in response to, namely the medicalised view of disability (Oliver, 1990). The

discipline began with a focus on offering 'a distinct critical perspective on the mechanisms society has used to exclude disabled people and how these can be challenged' (Cameron & Moore, 2014, p. 37). Simi Linton (2005) also describes disability studies as a discipline that:

aims to expose the ways that disability has been made exceptional and to work to naturalize disabled people – remake us all full citizens whose rights and privileges are intact, whose history and contributions are recorded, and whose often distorted representations in art, literature, film, theatre, and other forms of artistic expression are fully analyzed. (p. 518)

Furthermore, Tobin Siebers (2006) argues:

Disability studies does not treat disease or disability, hoping to cure or avoid them; it studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability identity and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion and oppression. (p. 3)

In the United Kingdom, disability studies developed as a discipline following the conception of the social model of disability (Barnes & Oliver, 2012; Oliver, 1990). Before this, during the 1970s, the Disabled People's Movement emerged to reform the understanding of disability, highlighting how society impacts the everyday experience of impairment (Swain et al., 2014). From this, the definition of disability was reconceptualised, providing distinct definitions of impairment and disability highlighting how they were different from one another. These definitions were first published by the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) in *The Fundamental Principles of Disability* in 1976, which stated the following:

Impairment: Lacking part of or all a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body.

Disability: The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary social organisation which takes little or no account of people who have physical impairments and this excludes them from the mainstream of social activities.

(UPIAS, 1976, p. 14)

These definitions acknowledge the difference between impairment and disability, signifying that impairment is a physical condition and disability is caused by society. And thus, following this, disability could be understood not as an individual problem but as a social issue. The definition was developed further to accommodate a range of impairments, including physical and sensory, learning difficulties and mental health problems (Barnes, 1996). As a theoretical framework for recognising the construction of disability in society, this became the foundation for the social model of disability. After disability studies scholar Mike Oliver coined the *social model of disability* as a term in 1983 - six years after the UPIAS manifesto was published - it went on to become the key theoretical underpinning for disability studies and the Disabled People's Movement in the United Kingdom (Oliver, 1986, 2009). Subsequently, the leading academic journal *Disability & Society*, previously called *Disability, Handicap and Society*, was founded in 1986. And Oliver's publication *The Politics of Disablement* (1990) is described as the first book to address the social and political interpretation of disability (Barnes & Mercer, 2010).

### **2.2.1 Fixing the Problem: The Medical Model of Disability**

Disability studies and the social model of disability were developed to oppose the individual view of disability. As illustrated in the UPIAS (1976) definition, disability was reconfigured from a personal defect to a social issue. The individual model of disability refers to the view of disability as a limitation, focusing on what an individual cannot do, what they are lacking and what is wrong with them (sic). Oliver (1990) states, 'The individual model for me encompassed a whole range of issues and was underpinned by what I call the personal tragedy theory of disability' (p. 1). As such, through the individual model, disability is viewed as a tragic accident.

Furthermore, the medical model was developed from the view that disability is an individual problem but extends it by emphasising the need for an individual to be fixed. The medical model highlights individual defects *and* the need for treatment, cure, and fixing. In both views, disability is something that is wrong with an individual (Cameron, 2014c). Until the 1970s, the individual and medical models of disability were the dominant views in society held by powerful groups, including healthcare professionals and the media (Barnes & Oliver, 2012) and continues to be the perspective to this day in some instances. The medical model takes no account of how society treats people with impairments but instead focuses solely on the personal limitations they cause. A person with an impairment would be encouraged to get treatment and seek rehabilitation to regain full access to society. But social barriers such as environmental issues and negative attitudes are disregarded, focusing on the individual's impairment as the only cause of disability. And although the social model has helped to change the view of disability in society, the individual and medical views can still be identified in many situations, particularly in cultural representations.

Medical model thinking views disability as a tragedy, locating disability 'exclusively in individual bodies' which 'strives to cure them by particular treatment [and] isolating the patient as diseased or defective' (Siebers, 2006, p. 173). From this, people with impairments are treated as victims of misfortune and pity (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). This is predominately within Western culture, where the individual model of disability is reinforced. As a result, the individual is blamed for their impairment and disability is rendered a tragic problem that needs medical attention (Cameron, 2014c). Consequently, if disability is viewed as a tragedy, disabled people will be treated as victims of a tragic event (Barnes & Oliver, 2012).

The medical model can be understood as the opposite of the social model which reflects the wider cultural assumptions and attitudes towards disability which focus on the problem located in the individual (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Many scholars believe that the views of the individual and medical model of disability are reinforced through cultural representations in mainstream literature and film (Cameron, 2014c; Norden, 1994b; Shakespeare, 1999). This results in stereotypes in cultural representations, such as the victim needing pity, the tragic but brave, and the evil villain (Longmore, 2003). Many scholars in disability studies have analysed and discussed representations of disability in media, and I explore these, with a particular focus on film, in section 2.3 of this literature review.

### **2.2.2 Breaking Down the Barriers: The Social Model of Disability**

Following the UPIAS definitions and the development of the social model of disability, disability could now be understood as a human rights and social justice issue caused by society rather than a medical and individual problem (Cameron, 2014d). As Siebers (2006) claims, disability is the



'effect of an environment hostile to some bodies and not to others, requiring advances in social justice rather than medicine' (p. 173). The development of the social model consequently enabled disabled people to address issues in their lives by looking beyond their impairment for the cause of the problem (Morris, 1991). The construction of disability in society can be caused by a wide range of barriers, including inaccessible buildings and transport, segregated schools, discriminatory attitudes and language, and stereotypical representations in media. And these all contribute to the disablement of people with impairments. And thus, the social exclusion and barriers in society make the everyday life of disabled people more difficult (Swain et al., 2014). Through the social model, disabled people have identified and challenged such barriers, including influencing change in media, accessibility, and policy (Barnes & Oliver, 2012). Swain et al. (2003) noted the significance of the social model as 'providing an alternative understanding of the experience and reality of disability, it has given disabled people a basis on which to organize themselves collectively (p. 24).

Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2018) describe the aim of the social model as follows:

To expose and remove barriers to disabled people's participation in all areas of life, including education, work environments, the benefits system, health and social services, housing, transport, and the devaluing of disabled people in media (including newspapers, films, television, and the web). (p. 78)

The social model was crucial to the disability movement in the United Kingdom and has become a powerful tool to challenge discrimination against disabled people (Cameron, 2014d) as it rejects the medical and individual view of disability. In doing so, this allows disabled people and

their allies to work towards identifying and removing barriers in society. There are, however, some criticisms of the social model in which scholars have argued that the social model does not account for the lived experience of impairment (Morris, 1991; Shakespeare, 2006). In addition, scholars have claimed that the social model does not address cultural imagery as a factor of disability (Ellis, 2015; Shakespeare, 1994; Waldschmidt, 2019). The criticisms of the social model of disability are discussed in the next part of this literature review. This is then followed by discussion on critical disability studies (Goodley, 2012, 2017), cultural disability studies (Bolt, 2018) and the cultural model of disability (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; Waldschmidt, 2019), which were all established as a result of such criticisms.

### **2.2.3 It's More Than Barriers: Critiques of the Social Model of Disability**

#### **2.2.3.1 Feminist Perspectives: What About Our Bodies?**

The social model was crucial for illustrating how society causes disability and moving beyond the simplistic individual and medical view of disability. It continues to contribute to improving disability equality, including eradicating barriers and creating a platform for political and social change. The social model has continued to be utilised as the foundational tool for disability studies. However, several scholars have critiqued the model, looking beyond social issues for answers (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002; Goodley, 2016; Shakespeare, 2006) and claiming a more viable model is needed (Owens, 2015). Since its development, the social model has been mainly supported by scholars associated with Marxism and materialist perspectives (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Oliver, 2013). As Goodley (2012) notes, the materialist social model of disability can now be viewed as a response to the social and economic exclusion of disabled people, such as

barriers to work, education and community (p. 632). The criticisms of the social model include the binary distinction between impairment and disability, which is viewed as problematic. This is because it does not consider the experience of impairment such as pain, fatigue, and mental health conditions which individuals can experience regardless of social barriers. The personal experience of impairment, known as the embodied experience, is not a component of the social model because the social model blames society for the cause of disability. Yet when disabling barriers in society are removed, the embodied experience of impairment still exists (Crow, 1996).

As such, feminist disability scholars were some of the first to critique the social model in the 1990s, suggesting that the social model neglects the individual experience of impairment (Crow, 1996; Morris, 1991; Reeve, 2012b; Swain & French, 2008; Thomas, 2004). Indeed, Tom Shakespeare and Nick Watson claimed that the lived experience of impairment could improve the social model as it would address the complexity of disablement, including personal and emotional aspects. Further, Shakespeare (2013) also claimed that if the social model neglects individual and medical approaches, there is a risk of suggesting that impairment does not cause any problems.

In response, disability studies scholars Barnes, Oliver and Barton (2002) stated in their edited collection *Disability Studies Today* that the social model of disability

does not deny the significance of impairment in disabled people's lives, but concentrates instead on the various barriers, economic, political, and social, constructed on top of impairment. Thus "disability" is not a product of individual failings but is socially created... Rather than identifying disability as an individual

limitation, the social model identifies society as the problem, and looks to fundamental political and cultural changes to generate solutions. (p. 5)

Because of this, Shakespeare (2006) suggested that disability studies should engage with feminist perspectives and theorise the experiences of disability, including the embodiment of impairment. Indeed, Jenny Morris (1991) claimed that strong defiance against the individual and medical models of disability often resulted in denying pain. She explains this eloquently in her influential book *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability* (Morris, 1991), stating, 'we can thus fall into the trap of trying to prove that our lives are worth living by denying that disability sometimes involves being ill, in pain, dying or generally experiencing a bloody awful time' (p.46). Furthermore, Morris (1991) refers to the rise of feminism and how it enabled a voice to be given to the personal experience of disability. Therefore, a feminist perspective of disability must concentrate on 'socioeconomic and ideological dimensions of our oppression but also on what it feels like to be unable to walk, to be in pain, to be incontinent, to have fits, to be unable to converse, to be blind or deaf, to have an intellectual ability which is much below the average' (Morris, 1991, p. 46).

Consequently, ten years later, Morris (2001) stated that 'the clear separation of the term's disability and impairment [in the social model] also enables us, or *should* [emphasis added] enable us, to talk about impairment and its effect on our lives' (p. 9). In Morris's view, the distinction between impairment and disability should make it easier for disabled people to address the impact of impairment; however, her hesitation by adding 'should' signifies that there is still difficulty in addressing pain and other effects of impairment. From these perspectives, Carol Thomas (1999) introduced the concept of *impairment*

*effects* to demonstrate how impairments can be disabling. The term describes the effects of impairment as non-socially imposed restrictions that are unavoidable. In her concept, Thomas (1999, 2014) asserts that impairment effects are not a disability; instead, impairment and impairment effects are natural pre-social experiences of disability. The concept of impairment effects has enabled disability studies scholars to acknowledge and contextualise the direct impact of impairments on their daily life alongside the experience of disability. Her definition of impairment effects states:

The direct and *unavoidable* [emphasis added] impacts that “impairments” (physical, sensory, intellectual, emotion) have on individuals’ embodied functioning in the social world. Impairments and impairment effects are always bio-social and culturally constructed in characters and may occur at any stage in the life course. (Thomas, 2014, p. 14)

In addition, Thomas provides a definition for *disablism* which is the term used to describe how society excludes people with impairments. She states, ‘disablism is a form of social oppression involving the social imposition of restrictions of activity on people with impairments’ (Thomas, 2007, p. 73). She focused on the phrase disablism rather than disability to emphasise its link with oppression and to make a connection between other forms of oppression such as sexism and racism. Thomas (2019) defines disablism as:

The social imposition of *avoidable restrictions* on the life activities, aspirations and psycho-emotional well-being of people categorised as ‘impaired’ by those deemed ‘normal’. Disablism is *social-relational* and constitutes a form of *social oppression* in contemporary society – alongside sexism, racism, ageism and

homophobia. As well as enacted in person-to-person interactions, disablism may manifest itself in institutionalised and other socio-structural forms. (p. 37)

As such, impairment effects are the unavoidable aspects of impairment that occur before the social aspects implicate the experience. Disablism, on the other hand, refers to the avoidable elements in society which are imposed on top of impairments. By making this distinction between the impairment/disability binary, feminist scholars have been able to illustrate the personal experience of their impairment which existed beyond societal barriers. Furthermore, these definitions extend the social model to demonstrate how it is not only societal barriers but also interpersonal experiences that cause problems. Additionally, Thomas (2019) published an article titled *Times Change, but Things Remain the Same*, where she emphasises that the meaning and importance of the two approaches: impairment effects and disablism remain the same.

Following the development of impairment effects and disablism, Donna Reeve developed *Psycho-emotional Disablism* to attend to the lived experience of disablism in society. Psycho-emotional disablism often occurs between the disabled person and another person or the disabled person and themselves. Reeve (2012b) states:

Direct psycho-emotional disablism undermines self-confidence and self-esteem because of the negative messages being received about self-worth and value.

These messages are reinforced by cultural myths and prejudices about the inherent undesirable status of disability. (p. 123)

The development of these theories by feminist disability studies scholars enabled the lived experience of impairment to be considered, explained and contextualised alongside the societal barriers creating disability. This

is valuable for contextualising personal experiences of impairment and disability, and for considering realistic and progressive portrayals of disability in cultural representations. For instance, where a character is disabled, a progressive or authentic representation may consider and show the impact of their impairment effects rather than only depicting them as a metaphor for evil or pity.

### **2.2.3.2 Do We Need a New Social Model of Disability?**

Thirty years after the conceptualisation of the social model of disability, Oliver (2013) responded to criticisms from scholars in the field of disability studies. He explained that the social model was never an 'all-encompassing framework within which everything that happens to disabled people could be understood or explained' (Oliver, 2013, p. 1). Instead, the social model of disability was developed as a tool to improve disabled people's lives and fight against the social barriers and oppression they faced. He further explains that although many people had criticised the social model over the years, there had been no alternative model to address the current issues. In response to Oliver (2013), Levitt (2017) argues that the social model needs to be re-invigorated because the current social model reflects the conditions in which it was created.

Furthermore, Levitt argues that the model should reflect the context and country it is being applied to. For example, the social model in Nordic countries aligns with their dominant understandings of disability; they do not have one single theory or model of disability. Instead, they focus on the wider relational approach, which they continue to work towards by revitalising current debates around the social model. In Nordic countries, disability is defined as 'a mismatch between the person's capabilities and the functional demands of the environment' (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2018, p. 20). And thus, changing the emphasis of the social model in the

United Kingdom could improve the social model and its use in improving the lives of disabled people, as Levitt argues. Additionally, he argues that the success of the social model suggests that it has the potential to be expanded to widen its scope and success. He posits five questions to help develop the social model of disability:

- 1) Which aspects of the negative influence of society on disability (other than barriers to inclusion) are particularly worth focusing on, and how can these be effectively addressed?
- 2) What ways of using the model (apart from a practical tool) seem promising, and how can these ways be fruitfully implemented?
- 3) To which groups of people (other than disability professionals in developed countries) is it important to disseminate the model and how can it be conveyed effectively?
- 4) Is it a good idea to present the social model in a manner which is contradictory (as opposed to complementary) to other models or that implies it is the only model conducive to emancipating disabled people?
- 5) What should be the primary goals of the social model and what steps can we take to achieve these objectives? (Levitt, 2017, pp. 592–593)

From this, it is surprising that Levitt did not attend to some of the dominating critiques of the social model that have been identified by other scholars, specifically the attention given to aspects of impairment and embodiment alongside disability and cultural imagery and its impact on disabled people. Levitt (2017) further asserts that the social model would have a 'greater impact if its emphasis was to more accurately reflect the conditions of the countries in which it is applied' (p. 593). Woods (2017) responded to Levitt (2017), emphasising that the social model is not currently sufficient for neurodivergence, including autism. If



the social model were to be re-invigorated, it should accommodate neurodiversity to help improve attitudes in society because, as Woods (2017) claims, the social model does not fit all types of impairment.

I would argue that the social model's conceptualisation which focuses on the social barriers that people with impairments face, as a generalisation, works adequately because the focus is on the barriers in society. Although the social model applies to physical impairments more sufficiently than other types of impairment as it can allow environmental barriers to be identified easily, the social model should be used only as the starting point for exploring discriminatory barriers towards people with impairments. Therefore, rather than developing the social model to evolve and accommodate all of the critique's scholars have mentioned, I believe additional theories and frameworks should be adopted to move beyond the social model. Fortunately, this has happened with the development of critical disability studies and cultural disability studies which I discuss in sections 2.2.6 and 2.2.7 of this literature review.

In response to Woods (2017), Berghs et al. (2019) claim that disabled people need a stronger social model for justice and rights: a social model of human rights. They argue that the current social model approach, which focuses on environmental barriers, changes in attitudes and adjustments, potentially creates restrictions by demonstrating what a lack of citizenship and rights look like in society. The heavy focus of the social model, they argue, has distracted from other issues such as austerity. A social model of human rights would enable and ensure the rights of disabled people, providing 'the right to live a dignified life, as well as to live in an environment that enables people to flourish with disability' (Berghs et al., 2019, p. 1). On the other hand, Riddle (2020) asserts that a stronger social model of disability is unnecessary because although the changes could address current issues for disabled people, strengthening the model would be misleading. He explains that the

emphasis on modelling disability fails to improve the articulation of the experience of disability. Thus, an improvement in conceptualising equality and justice should be addressed beyond focusing on how we model disability. Riddle (2020) asserts, 'the proper target of our concern should be on how we conceptualize the notions of equality and justice to inform sound policy, and not on how we model the experience of disability' (p.1). This does not imply that he agrees with the medical model or ignores human rights and equality issues that disabled people face daily. Rather, he puts those issues at the forefront of disability, using the social model as a foundational base, without focusing too much on conceptualising the experience into models. Riddle further clarifies that a model of disability was originally created to help understand the experience of disability following the UPIAS definitions. He then argues that an accurate model of disability should capture what it is like to live with impairment and disability placed upon them, foregrounding the lived experience of disabled people, including environmental barriers and the experience of impairment. Disability justice should follow where the social model ends (Riddle, 2020).

From this, it is clear that there are a range of debates ongoing about the social model of disability in terms of its effectiveness, even after three to four decades of its use. However, I believe that the social model is strong enough as a foundational model used for conceptualising disability. Therefore, I support the social model view of disability as Oliver (2013) developed, but I have also acknowledged its flaws that align with the critiques I have discussed. For example, the model may not attend to the experience of bodily impairment and needs a stronger emphasis on cultural imagery; however, I welcome Oliver's claim that the social model was never meant to be an all-encompassing framework because it has been valuable for what it initially aimed to do, explain how disability is

*caused* by society. Therefore, I use the social model as the foundation of my research position and framework for this study, but I also develop from it, recognising the lived experience of impairment and attending to cultural imagery of disability which I argue contributes to the construction of disability. For this, I move through and beyond the social model to other models and theories of disability discussed in the following sections of this literature review.

#### **2.2.4 Disability Pride and Acceptance: The Affirmation Model**

When scholars were critiquing the social model, the affirmation model of disability was proposed and developed. It was first contextualised by John Swain and Sally French (2010) to address some of the criticisms that the social model faced and was further developed by Colin Cameron (2014b). The model is a 'non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people, grounded in the benefits of a lifestyle of being impaired and disabled' (Swain & French, 2000, p. 569). Following his research on impairment, disability and identity, Cameron (2014b) notes that the affirmation model identifies impairment as a common and ordinary part of life. From this, he developed definitions of impairment and disability which are as follows:

*Impairment:* physical, sensory, emotional and cognitive difference, divergent from culturally valued norms of embodiment, to be expected and respected in its own terms in a diverse society.

*Disability:* a personal and social role which simultaneously invalidates the subject position of people with impairments and validates the subject position of those considered normal.

(Cameron, 2014b, p. 6)

This development is beneficial as it situates impairment as a difference that should be expected in society rather than a medical issue that individuals fear and should be fixed. In doing so, the affirmation model allows individuals to accept, embrace and celebrate their differences. Disability, on the other hand, is still identified in terms of a social construct. However, it is extended by addressing the requirements in society to live with disability as 'passive dependency or in terms of denial of the significance of impairment' (Cameron, 2014b, p. 6). Cameron (2014b) further asserts that this 'negates the lived experience of impairment and signifies the desirability of normality' (p. 6). This is particularly valuable as it illustrates the development of the binary between impairment and disability, which develops from the social model to attend to some of its failures. In addition, it shows the change towards the focus on the expectations of normality, situating the problem with society rather than the individual with an impairment, thus advancing from medical model views. Further, the affirmation model focuses on difference where impairment can be accepted and embraced, which supports the criticisms that scholars claimed was lacking in the social model in terms of attending to the lived experience of impairment and disability. Consequently, for film analysis, the affirmation model helps identify narratives and characters that depict disability as a lived experience and celebrate disability pride (Alice & Ellis, 2021).

### **2.2.5 What about Cultural Imagery? Disability as a Social and Cultural Construct**

Another criticism of the social model of disability is that it does not address the cultural representation of disability. In her book, *Disability and Popular Culture: Focusing Passion, Creating Community and Expressing Defiance*, Ellis (2015) emphasises the two main critiques of the social model of disability as previously discussed. Firstly, the social

model does not attend to the personal experience of impairment. And secondly, it neglects cultural imagery of disability and the role this plays in constructing disability in society. Indeed, Tom Shakespeare (1994) addressed how the social model approach to disability disregards the cultural imagery of impairment. He argued that the social model needs to be reconceptualized because people with impairments are disabled by material discrimination and prejudice in cultural representation (Shakespeare, 1994). Following this, Shakespeare pointed out the frequency of disability in historical and cultural representations and how they often use impairment as a symbol or metaphor. In addition, he discussed several examples of key pieces of work in the field that analysed disability representation. This included Paul Longmore's (2003) essay *Screening Stereotype: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures*, originally published in 1987. In this essay, Longmore reveals the ubiquity of disability in television and film, from impaired monsters and criminals to blind detectives and animated characters, such as stuttering Porky Pig and mentally impaired Dopey. In addition, he notes the prevalence and frequency of disabled characters in television and film and how often it is overlooked. He questions:

Why are there so many disabled characters, and why do we overlook them so much of the time? Why do television and film so frequently screen disabled characters for us to see, and why do we usually screen them out of our consciousness even as we absorb those images? (Longmore, 2003, pp. 131–132)

Shakespeare (1994) also draws attention to Barnes (1992), who analysed disability imagery in media for the *British Council of Organisations of Disabled People*. Barnes (1992) illustrates a wide range of recurring stereotypes in media:

- The Disabled Person as Pitiable and Pathetic
- The Disabled Person as an Object of Violence
- The Disabled Person as Sinister and Evil
- The Disabled Person as Atmosphere or Curio
- The Disabled Person as Super Cripple
- The Disabled Person as an Object of Ridicule
- The Disabled Person as Their Own Worst and Only Enemy
- The Disabled Person as Burden
- The Disabled Person as Sexually Abnormal
- The Disabled Person as Incapable of Participating Fully in Community Life
- The Disabled Person as Normal (p. 2)

In addition, in the abstract for this publication, it is stated how the portrayal of disabled people in history is oppressive and negative, resulting in disabled people being depicted as 'socially flawed able-bodied people, not as disabled people with their own identities' (Barnes, 1992, p. 1).

### **2.2.6 Moving Through and Beyond the Social Model: Critical Disability Studies**

When criticisms appeared in contradiction to the social model of disability, critical disability studies emerged in the United Kingdom (Goodley, 2013; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). The discipline seeks to change the study of disability by not forgetting about the social model but using it as

one of many analysis tools. Critical disability studies moves beyond the binaries of social/medical, British/American and impairment/disability, as well as welcoming perspectives from humanities and psychology to draw on feminist, queer, critical race, and postcolonial perspectives, amongst others. Mallett and Runswick-Cole (2018) note critical disability studies aim to 'move on, with and through the social model of disability to expose and challenge the oppression of disabled people' (p. 16). Furthermore, Goodley (2013) strongly asserts, 'critical disability studies starts with disability but never ends with it: disability is *the* space from which to think through a host of political theoretical and practical issues that are relevant to all' (p. 632). And thus, it seeks to extend into new territory beyond the social model and simultaneously, where necessary, critique the model's limitations (Shildrick, 2015). One area of critical disability studies is cultural disability studies, where scholars focus on cultural representations of disability. As I will discuss in the next section, cultural disability studies has flourished in the US and the UK with an extensive range of work which takes disability studies beyond the social sciences and consequently beyond the social model to engage with cultural imagery (Bolt, 2019).

### **2.2.6.1 North American Perspectives: The Minority Group Model**

As the social model was gaining momentum in the United Kingdom, scholars and activists in the United States were developing their own approach. This followed the civil rights movement in America (1954 – 1968), where marginalised groups were fighting for their rights and challenging the inequality and oppression they faced. And thus, disabled people began to develop a positive identity (McRuer, 2006). This is known as the minority model, which challenges the oppression and ableism that disabled people face and 'gives primary positioning to disability as located in the environment rather than the person' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2012, p.

42). The minority model shares many of the same values as the British social model, emphasising the social construct view of disability and the problems located in society rather than the individual. However, it is also emphasised that the minority model has moved beyond the social model (Mitchell & Snyder, 2012). The development of disability studies, through the minority model, in North America was very interdisciplinary, and because of this, there was a strong focus on culture, language and literature (Mallett & Runswick-Cole, 2018). This saw the cultural turn in disability studies with the development of cultural disability studies which takes 'disability studies beyond the social sciences to engage with the detail and relevance of the cultural imagination' (Bolt, 2019, p. 2).

As Goodley (2017) notes, disability studies in North America and Canada have always transcended the social sciences and humanities. Key scholars in cultural disability studies include Lennard Davis, David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Robert McRuer. These scholars, amongst others, have contributed key theories that continue to be utilised in the field and will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this literature review. Although, from North American perspectives, there is less focus on the distinction between impairment and disability in contrast to disability studies in the United Kingdom, the overarching perspective is that disability is 'social and cultural, not medical or individualist' (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 25). This situates disability as a social *and* cultural construct which also supports my view of disability.

### **2.2.7 Focusing on Narrative: Cultural Disability Studies Theories**

The social construction view of disability lies at the foundation of cultural disability studies and the cultural model of disability. But it extends the social model to include culture in the construction of disability. From this,



cultural texts such as literature and film become central for exploring the construction or creation of disability. Many North American scholars were influential in the development of cultural disability studies. One of the first and most influential texts in cultural disability studies is Lennard Davis' (1995) book *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*. In the opening pages, Davis (1995) asserts that the concept of disability was left out of identity politics, stating, 'There is a strange and really unaccountable silence when the issue of disability is raised... The silence is stranger, too, since so much of left criticism has devoted itself to the issue of the body, of the social construction of sexuality and gender' (p. 5). Subsequently, Davis (1995) devised the concept of *normalcy* and states, 'To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body' (p. 23). *Normalcy*, then, is a term that is deployed to describe how 'people think about themselves in relation to others around them' (Cameron, 2014a, p. 107). Davis draws attention to how individuals measure and evaluate others to obtain a higher rank because of their conformity to society's 'normal' expectations. Moreover, Cameron (2014) notes that the problem of disability is not an individual's body but the requirement of *normalcy*, which identifies impairment as abnormal. Indeed, society has marked the disabled body as abnormal and thus, disabled people are expected to get their body to as close to *normal* as possible (Titchkosky, 2009).

In relation to the concept of *normalcy*, Garland Thomson (1997) coined the term *normate* in her foundational work *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. The *normate* is 'the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics,' which 'designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings' (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 8). And thus, the *normate* focuses on the

able-bodied rather than the disabled to draw attention to the prevalence of normalcy in society. In addition, Garland-Thomson (1997) draws upon the representation of disability in cultural texts emphasising the prevalence in folk tales to classic myths. She states, 'the disabled body is almost always a freakish spectacle presented by the mediating narrative voice' and asserts that 'most disabled characters are enveloped by the otherness that their disability signals in the text' (Garland-Thomson, 1997, p. 10). She argues, in her conclusion, that we should see disability differently, moving from abnormal to extraordinary and from pathology to identity. This is particularly important as the emphasis is placed on how disability appears in cultural representation. This stresses the need to change the perspective of disability by uncovering the representations that often go unnoticed. Indeed, it is also worth noting that there are many similarities in this way of thinking about disability that align with the social and affirmation models of disability, demonstrating how cultural disability studies theories can be adopted from a social model perspective of disability, as they build upon it.

Following Garland-Thomson's significant development of the normate, another critical theory in US disability studies was developed by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000). They coined the term *narrative prosthesis* in their influential text *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. They claim that narrative prosthesis is 'the notion that all narratives operate out of a desire to compensate for a limitation or to reign in excess' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 53). And state that 'This narrative approach to difference identifies the literary object par excellence as that which has somehow become out of the ordinary – a deviation from a widely accepted cultural norm' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 53). This suggests that disability always requires a story and explanation in narratives. As Couser (2005) claims, 'deviations from

bodily norms often provoke a demand for explanatory narrative in everyday life. Whereas the unmarked case (the “normal” body) can pass without narration, the marked case (the scar, the limp, the missing limb, or the obvious prosthesis) calls for a story’ (p. 604). A story that subverts the cultural norm often explains the deviation within its narrative, predominately by relying on visual metaphors or fixing the deviance somehow. In literature and media, disabled characters are often reduced to functions where the disability is a prop used to progress the story. Mitchell & Snyder (2000) explore how, throughout history, disability has been used as a ‘crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight’ (p. 49). Unlike other identities which are vastly underrepresented, such as race, gender and sexuality, images of disability are highly prevalent in all forms of print and visual media (Davis, 2013; Longmore, 2003; Norden, 1994b). And Mitchell and Snyder claim this has happened because the narrative structure revolves around a flaw that needs a resolution to be restored. The flaw, they argue, is almost always represented by a disabled character or symbol. Therefore, narratives have become dependent on disability to illustrate a characters lack; restoring them ultimately reinforces the expectation of normalcy.

In *narrative prosthesis*, Mitchell and Snyder explain how this often occurs when disability is used for the character to overcome their impairment which reinforces normalcy as the true happy ending. They describe this in relation to real-life prosthetics as they claim:

While an actual prosthesis is always somewhat discomfoting, a textual prosthesis alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view. . . the erasure of disability via a ‘quick fix’ of an impaired physicality or intellect removes an audiences’ need for concern or continuing vigilance. (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 8)

Furthermore, Mitchell and Snyder (2000) discuss how disability can occur as a counternarrative where narratives offer 'poetical and narrative efforts that expand options for depicting disability experiences' (p. 165) which are beyond the expectation of normalcy that often involves overcoming. In addition, they claim that postmodern narratives offer a representation that 'does not seek to fully repair or resolve a character's impairment, but rather delves into the social, personal, political, and psychological implications of impairment as bequeathing a social awareness' (p. 165). This follows the interest of scholars 'searching for positive stories alongside exposing examples of social oppression which pushes disability studies further by challenging the potential for literature to act as a site of resistance or creative re-imagining' (Hall, 2015, p. 34). The development of this approach allows scholars to address and analyse disability as an 'identity, perspective, and subjectivity' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2013, p. 165). Thus, narrative prosthesis is a valuable framework that enables scholars to attend to the wide range of disability representations in cultural texts and to reveal the reliance upon disability as a plot device.

As Alice Hall (2015) states, the theory of narrative prosthesis 'encourages critics to draw attention to metaphors and stereotypical narrative scripts that might otherwise be taken for granted,' and she claims that narrative prosthesis 'invites a close reading of the details of the text in political terms' (p. 37). In doing so, narrative prosthesis plays an essential role in emphasising 'the striking presence of disability across literary history on a level of metaphor as well as a level of character' (Hall, 2015, p. 37). This illustrates the importance of narrative prosthesis as a framework for uncovering and analysing representations in cultural texts. Scholars have subsequently utilised narrative prosthesis in analysing literature and popular culture to illustrate how characters may somehow exemplify narrative prosthesis or subvert it. In literature, classic

texts include *Of Mice and Men*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, in addition to characters such as Shakespeare's Richard III and Dicken's Tiny Tim have all been identified and analysed through the framework of narrative prosthesis to illustrate the text's reliance upon disability as a metaphor or plot device within the narrative (Hall, 2015; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000).

Narrative prosthesis also works as a valuable framework for analysing films for their reliance on disability. For example, in the James Bond films, many, if not all, villains have a physical impairment (Campbell, 2021; Gibson, 2021). This contrasts with the hero, James Bond, who is able-bodied and depicted with no bodily difference. In this way, disability is a metaphor for evilness. The reliance on this trope is regressive and reinforces the damaging beliefs toward people with physical disfigurements in society (Garland-Thomson, 1997; Kirby, 2018). Furthermore, Shakespeare (1999) states:

The use of disability as a character trait, plot device, or atmosphere is a lazy shortcut. These representations are not accurate or fair reflections of the experience of disabled people. Such stereotypes reinforce negative attitudes towards disabled people and ignorance about the nature of disability. (p. 165)

Following a similar perspective on disability as narrative prosthesis, Ato Quayson (2007) developed the term *aesthetic nervousness* to describe the process 'when the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability' (p. 15). Aesthetic nervousness can occur at three levels. Firstly, during the interaction between a disabled and non-disabled character in the text, where tensions may be identified. The second is when these tensions between the characters are reflected across all levels of the text, beyond the

characters portrayal, to the symbols or motifs and overall structure or plot. And finally, aesthetic nervousness occurs in the interaction between the reader and the text. As Quayson (2007) argues, 'In works where disability plays a prominent role, the reader's perspective is also affected by the short-circuiting of the dominant protocols governing the text—a short-circuit triggered by the representation of disability' (Quayson, 2007, p. 15). And therefore, 'Aesthetic nervousness overlaps social attitudes of disability that themselves often remain unexamined in their prejudices and biases' (p. 15). This shows the dominant negative attitudes associated with disability in culture. As he asserts, this is a result of the reader being predominantly non-disabled. This relates to Garland-Thomson's (1997) concept of the normate, which Quayson also refers to in his book. Indeed, he claims that the relations between the normate and the disabled reader result from the interactionism model. Furthermore, Quayson (2007) states:

The idea of symbolic interactionism is pertinent to the discussion of literary texts... because not only do the characters organize their perceptions of one another on the basis of given symbolic assumptions, but as fictional characters they are themselves also woven out of a network of symbols and interact through a symbolic relay of signs. (p. 18)

Quayson also supports the claims previously asserted by other disability studies scholars on the pervasiveness of disability in culture. He states that 'some form of physical or mental deformation' is often 'relevant for the discussion of *all* literary texts' (Quayson, 2007, p. 22) because of the cultural history of disability. Moreover, he asserts the dominance of physical or social deformation as a starting point for narratives in many folktales, demonstrating its prevalence throughout history and worldwide. As well as introducing the theory of aesthetic nervousness, Quayson

(2007) also developed a typology of disability representations where nine categories are defined to describe the different ways in which disability is portrayed in literary texts. These categories are:

Disability as null set and/or moral test

Disability as the interface with otherness (race, class, and social identity)

Disability as an articulation of disjuncture between thematic and narrative vectors

Disability as a bearer of moral deficit/evil

Disability as an epiphany, disability as a signifier of ritual insight

Disability as an inarticulable

Disability as an enigmatic tragic insight

Disability as a hermeneutical impasse

Disability as normality (Quayson, 2007, p. 52)

The categories in Quayson's typology of disability draw parallels with many stereotypes identified by other scholars. However, there is also a focus on broader and more positive categories enabling analyses that attend to progressive portrayals of disability. Moreover, McRuer (2006) argues there is a clear association between critical disability studies and queer theory. In his book, *Crip Theory*, he develops the idea of *compulsory able-bodiedness*, arguing that compulsory able-bodiedness, in a sense, produces disability as it is 'thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness' (McRuer, 2006, p. 2). Queer theory in disability studies aims to explore and

uncover how heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are depended upon and reinforced in society. Furthermore, compulsory able-bodiedness develops from the assumption that able-bodied identities are preferable. And thus, 'like compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory able-bodiedness functions by covering over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice' (McRuer, 2006, p. 8). Therefore, compulsory able-bodiedness allows scholars to uncover these dominant images in literature and film.

### **2.2.7.1 Disability is Constructed in Culture: The Cultural Model of Disability Studies**

Following the developments in cultural disability studies, Mitchell and Snyder (2006) introduced the *cultural model of disability*. They stated that:

We believe the cultural model provides a fuller concept than the social model, in which 'disability' signifies only discriminatory encounters. The formulation of a cultural model allows us to theorize a political act of renaming that designates disability as a site of resistance and a source of cultural agency previously suppressed. (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 10)

In addition, they claim that disability must include 'the outer and inner reaches of culture and experience as a combination of profoundly social and biological forces' (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 7). In doing so, impairment is recognised not solely as bodily difference but as both human variation and socially mediated difference where 'an embodied experience can be embraced while also resulting in social discrimination and material effects' (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 10). Disability studies scholars have praised the perspectives of US-based approaches for exploring cultural imagery and moving beyond the rigid views often



expressed in the social model (Bolt, 2018; Shakespeare, 2014). In addition, Anne Waldschmidt (2017) proposes that the cultural model of disability should not replace the social model. Instead, critical/cultural disability studies should 'acknowledge that disability is *both* socially and culturally constructed' (2017, p. 24). Waldschmidt (2017, 2019) states that the cultural model of disability requires a shift in focus and a change in epistemological perspective to challenge normality. The cultural model was further defined as 'the analysis of the representations of disabled people in the cultural spaces of art, media, and literature' (Joshua & Schillmeier, 2010, p. 5). Although Mitchell and Snyder (2006) explicitly situated the cultural model of disability as primarily associated with US-American disability studies, it quickly gained traction in disability studies in the United Kingdom. In particular, the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* - which was founded in 2006 and published its first issue in 2007 - focuses specifically on representations of disability, publishing various textual analysis informed by disability theory and experiences of disability. In the first article, David Bolt introduces the journal. He explains its creation is due to 'a response to a series of interrelated absences, the most fundamental of which being that disability is implicitly and/or explicitly present in all literary works, but too frequently absent from literary criticism' (Bolt, 2007, p. i). As a result, in cultural disability studies, disability becomes a critical methodology and perspective where scholars can explore 'examples where the text does not explicitly name a particular impairment or condition, but where disability structures the logic of the narrative or ways of seeing and knowing in the text' (Hall, 2020, p. 2).

### **2.2.8 Defining Disability: Social, Cultural and Embodiment**

Following these developments in disability studies, there have been a range of definitions of disability formed. Davis (1997) identifies the

distinction between impairment and disability as he explains, 'An impairment involves a loss... of sight, hearing, mobility, mental ability, and so on. But an impairment only becomes a disability when the ambient society creates environments with barriers – affective, sensory, cognitive, or architectural' (pp. 506-507). In addition, Berube (2005) states how 'Disability is not a static condition; it is a fluid and labile fact of embodiment, and as such it has complex relations to the conditions of narrative, because it compels us to understand embodiment in relation to temporality' (p. 570). And Garland-Thomson (2002) claims that 'Disability is not simply a natural state of bodily inferiority and inadequacy. Rather, it is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender' (p. 74). Furthermore, Garland-Thomson (2002) states:

Disability is a broad term in which cluster ideological categories as varied as sick, deformed, ugly, old, crazy, maimed, afflicted, abnormal or debilitated - all of which disadvantage people by devaluing bodies that do not conform to cultural standards. Thus disability functions to preserve and validate such privileged designations as beautiful, healthy, normal, fit, competent, intelligent - all of which provide cultural capital to those who can claim such status, who can reside within these subject positions. (pp. 74-75)

What is clear from these descriptions and definitions of disability is that disability is an ambiguous term to describe the treatment of difference in society and culture. And it is clear that although scholars provide a range of conceptualisations, it is the social and cultural treatment in response to those who are different that is at the core of all perspectives which moves beyond individual and medical views of disability, even when impairment is considered through embodiment. Following the developments of the

definitions of disability and the different models of disability in disability studies, this study will repeatedly refer to the medical, social, affirmation and cultural models. As such, Table 1 displays the differences for each model of disability. By using the models of disability as a framework of analysis, representations of disability can be uncovered and explored for how they depict disability.

*Table 1 - The Models of Disability in Disability Studies*

<b>Medical Model</b>	<b>Social Model</b>	<b>Affirmation Model</b>	<b>Cultural Model</b>
Disability is a medical and individual problem	Disability is a social problem	Disability is a positive social identity	Disability is a cultural problem
Disability is caused by impairments (e.g., injury, illness or condition that causes a loss or difference of psychological or physiological function)	Disability is caused by societal barriers (e.g., inaccessible buildings, social exclusion, discriminatory attitudes)	Disability is caused by society	Disability is caused by cultural barriers (e.g., literary and media representations of disability)

<p>Focused on fixing the impairment or difference even if they do not cause pain or illness</p>	<p>Focused on removing barriers, changing policy and improving attitudes towards disability</p>	<p>Focused on addressing the limitations of the social model and promoting positive identity of disability, involving impairment and disability</p>	<p>Focused on challenging cultural ideas of disability and expectations of 'normal'</p>
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### 2.2.9 Ableism

Another development from critical disability studies is the concept of ableism which shifts the gaze of disability. Rather than focusing on the discrimination against disabled people, it looks at the discrimination that is caused in favour of non-disabled people. Whilst many perspectives in disability studies - through the social model view of disability - are that of disablism, turning to ableism provides a framework for looking at *why* environments, activities and attitudes are constructed in a particular way which often favour able-bodied people. As disability studies and ableism studies scholar Fiona Campbell (2009) states:

Ableism refers to a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human. (p. 44)

Ableism and disablism are similar phrases used often synonymously to describe the experience of discrimination in relation to disability. Ableism,

however, turns the spotlight onto the category of *normal*. In doing so, ableism allows one to consider why society has been constructed in specific ways to fit particular abilities and embodiments. Disability studies scholars claim that considering ableism is useful alongside a social-relational approach to disability because an ableist framework can complement the social model of disability and develop the field further both methodologically and theoretically.

Wolbring (2012) states that ableism is an 'ability-based and ability-justified understanding of oneself, one's body, one's relationship with others within one's species, other species and one's environment' (p. 79). Ableism develops from disablism and moves beyond a barrier's approach of disability to include a broader range of difference. And more recently, Bogart and Dunn (2019) claimed that ableism is 'stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and social oppression towards people with disabilities' (p. 651).

Evidently, ableism provides a broad definition for the oppression and discrimination faced by disabled people at a social level identifying how it privileges a non-disabled perspective. Although there are numerous definitions of disablism and ableism, it is clear that firstly, the distinction between the two phrases is necessary, and secondly, that although they have slightly different meanings, they are both describing the oppression and discrimination towards disabled people. For the purposes of this thesis, the two terms are defined as:

Disablism: Discrimination against disabled people

Ableism: Discrimination in favour of non-disabled people

As discussed, these two terms both refer to types of disability discrimination. By shifting the focus to ableism, it allows scholars to identify the issues which are, unfortunately, ingrained in our society.

From inaccessible environments to media stereotypes, society often promotes ableist views by favouring non-disabled people. Studying from an ableist perspective allows scholars to shift the focus so that disabled people are not objects of study but instead, the focus is towards the structures, beliefs, practices and processes in society that favours non-disabled people.

### **2.3 Disability Representation in Film**

The analysis of disability in film, from a disability studies perspective, stemmed from disability activists and scholars in the 1980s and 1990s. Safran (1998) called for greater attention to the portrayal of disability in film. This was followed by Hoeksema and Smit (2001) claiming that the fusion of film studies and disability studies was needed to explore the cultural images of disability and the many ways these images are understood. Wilde (2018) claims that this recommendation was important because it enabled scholars to revisit and develop theories and methodologies; previous work had relied heavily on depictions of impairment without acknowledging the construction of disability and critiquing representations as a social and cultural issue. Furthermore, Hoeksema and Smit (2001) argued that the fusion of disability studies and film studies moved beyond disability activism toward methods of analysis, style and structure, allowing deeper film analysis. Following this, Chivers and Markotić (2010) explored the representation of disability in film in their edited collection where they coined the phrase *the problem body* to explain the multifaceted lived experience that constructs disability physically *and* socially. Through this, they claim to not solely emphasise 'physical disability per se but [place] an emphasis on the transformation of physical difference into cultural patterns of spectacle, patterns that replicate a range of pathologizing practices that oppress people' (Chivers & Markotić, 2010, p. 9).

So far, I have discussed several studies that have analysed the representation of disability in film and television (Barnes, 1992; Longmore, 2003). These were identified by Shakespeare (1994) as some of the first scholars to engage with disability representation in this way. In doing so, they were not only highlighting the prevalence of disability in media but also how often disability is negatively portrayed (Schwartz et al., 2010). Studies that followed developed beyond identifying representations of impairment on the surface level by conducting in-depth analysis from various perspectives, theories and lenses, and synthesising with techniques from film studies. This allowed scholars to uncover the many ways disability occurred not only in the text but also as a result of external factors such as production and casting. For example, discourse analysis can reveal how disability occurs within a text between characters. In contrast, aspects of film analysis allow scholars to understand how the film's producer may contribute to the disabling aspects of the film in terms of mise-en-scene, aesthetic choices and casting. Most importantly, however, by retaining a disability-informed perspective, scholars could now challenge the 'binary of disabled and non-disabled subjectivities' (Wilde, 2018, p. 14).

Throughout history, disability has been depicted in stereotypical ways that 'are internalized by disabled and non-disabled people alike and build social stereotypes, create artificial limitations, and contribute to the discrimination and minority status hated by most disabled people' (Shapiro, 1993, p. 30). As Cameron (2014) suggests, stereotypes shape how minority groups are viewed by others, limiting the narratives for those people to understand and make sense of their own experiences. Further, Hall et al. (2019) describe stereotyping as

Part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the "normal" and the "deviant," the

“normal” and the “pathological,” the “acceptable” and the “unacceptable,” what “belongs” and what does not or is “Other,” between “insiders” and “outsiders,” Us and Them...*stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power.* (p. 248) as cited in (McGillivray et al., 2019, p. 8).

There has been a broad range of stereotypes identified in disability studies literature that show the numerous ways in which disabled people are characterised, imagined, and as a result, treated. For example, Nelson (1999) identified seven common stereotypes of disability in film and television. These are disability as pitiable or pathetic; supercrip; sinister, evil and criminal; better off dead; maladjusted; a burden and unable to live a successful life. This was echoed by Cameron (2014), who emphasised three of the most dominant stereotypes: ‘the pitiable and pathetic victim; the tragic but brave supercrip who triumphs over adversity; the bitter and twisted crip with a chip’ (p. 144). Stereotypes dominate imagery in mass media, literature and popular culture so much that ‘they are not easily noticed as contestable’ (Young, 1991, p. 59). But this has real-life implications as it complicates the lived experience of disabled people who may ‘get caught up in the stereotyped roles and expectations set before them’ (Cameron, 2014, p. 144). Furthermore, disability studies scholars have also identified stereotypes, including disability as a freak (Garland-Thomson, 1996), the techno marvel, the noble warrior, and the sweet innocent (Norden, 1994). And to this day, representations of disability are still discussed, analysed and interrogated because they rely upon stereotypical views of disability (Holcomb & Latham-Mintus, 2022; Jeffress, 2021).

Moreover, by identifying and analysing recurring stereotypes, scholars aim to ‘argue that archetypal disability narratives are often misrepresentations which fail to do justice to the complexities of disability



as an identity, a way of being in the world, or an embodied, lived experience' (Hall, 2015, p. 32). This emphasises the importance of not only focusing on negative imagery that relies on stereotypes but also recognising disability as a counternarrative. From this, I would argue that using the models of disability, specifically the medical, social and affirmation models, provide a valuable framework for analysing all representations of disability. In the next section, I will discuss several stereotypes that appear in the field of disability studies and in literature, media and film.

### **2.3.1 Stereotypes of Disability**

#### **2.3.1.1 Disability as Supercrip**

The *supercrip* is a common stereotype of disability that has received a lot of scholarly critique in disability studies. The stereotype is an assumption focusing on the disabled person's 'overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary' (Schalk, 2016, p. 73). Cameron (2014) describes the stereotype as 'the tragic but brave supercrip who triumphs over adversity' (p. 144). In this way, disabled people are portrayed as inspirational for overcoming their impairment. Often, narratives overemphasise the overcoming aspect by giving disabled people extraordinary abilities. As Clare (2009) asserts, supercrip narratives rarely show 'the conditions that make it so difficult for people with Down's syndrome to have romantic partners, for blind people to have adventures, for disabled kids to play sports' (p. 2). She asserts here that she does not mean medical conditions but the 'material, social, legal conditions... the lack of access, lack of employment, lack of education, lack of personal attendant services... the stereotypes and attitudes, and the oppression (Clare, 2009, p. 2). This situates the supercrip stereotype as an attitudinal barrier to

those with impairments who are viewed for their impairment and how they should or can overcome it.

In mass media, Zhang and Haller (2013) note that disabled people are frequently framed as disadvantaged, ill victims and supercrips. Schalk (2016) argues that the supercrip stereotype can relate to a range of depictions in popular culture where characters perform extraordinary actions and where they overachieve despite their impairment. As a result, the supercrip stereotype can 'set unreal expectations for people with disabilities to "overcome" the effects of their disabilities through sheer force of will' (Schalk, 2016, p. 74). Still, at the same time, Schalk (2016) argues that 'these representations depend upon our ableist culture's low standards for the lives of disabled people' (p. 74). From this, disability is not viewed as part of life but instead demands the disabled person to overcome or achieve beyond the normal expectations (Barnes, 1992). Indeed, Grue (2015) argues that the supercrip's central feature is the 'success at overcoming, at demonstrating ability beyond that which is commonly expected of disability' (p. 1).

In film representations, the supercrip stereotype appears in many stories, particularly in sci-fi and fantasy genres, where technological advancements inform narratives. In these narratives, technology is often used to cure the impaired character. As a result, curing narratives erase impairment from the stories, perpetuating the notion that disability must be fixed and cured (Wälivaara, 2018b), a view that is rooted in the medical model of disability. This contributes to 'constructing able-bodiedness as a societal and cultural norm' (Wälivaara, 2018b, p. 1041). And as a result, it favours able-bodiedness as a state of normalcy and portrays disability as something that should be overcome and cured. And from this, the characters are often given super-abilities.

Compulsory able-bodiedness reveals how disability is usually removed by transforming or eliminating impaired bodies with technology (McRuer, 2006). In doing so, this fixes the body to the expected level of normalcy. This is particularly prevalent in science fiction films, as Allan (2013) argues:

When integrated into the able body, technology makes the human body better - an idealised version of itself. When technology is applied to the disabled body, however, it all too often is an attempt to cure or normalize what is deemed 'wrong' with the body. Take the technology away and the disabled body's supposed lack remains (p. 10).

Furthermore, the cure narrative of disability associated with technology and the supercrip stereotype draws similarities with the *cyborg* (Haraway, 1985; Reeve, 2012a). In Donna Haraway's 1985 seminal essay *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*, the cyborg is described as 'a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (Haraway, 2016, p. 5). The cyborg transcends human boundaries and breaks down the dualism in society that has contributed to marking individuals as Other. Haraway (2016) claims that 'cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves' (p. 67). The cyborg figure has been influential, especially in feminist studies (Wolkmark, 1999). However, in Haraway's essay, disability remains particularly absent. Indeed, disability is often overlooked in cyborg theory, or when addressed, it often fails to explain the multi-dimensional experience of disability (Cheyne, 2013; Reeve, 2012a). Haraway (2016) makes one reference to disability in her essay when she states, 'perhaps paraplegics and other severally handicapped [sic] people can (and sometimes do) have the most intense experiences of complex hybridization with other communication devices'

(p. 61). To support this claim, Haraway discusses the literary text *The Ship Who Sang* by Anne McCaffrey (1969), where a young girl is transformed into a spaceship. She then states, 'gender, sexuality, embodiment, skill: all were reconstituted in the story. Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?' (p. 61). However, disability studies scholar Ria Cheyne (2013) analysed the McCaffrey text through a disability studies lens and asserts, 'rather than being a narrative where gender, sexuality, and embodiment are "reconstituted," as Haraway claims, "Ship" is a tale that shores up the supremacy of "the normal" in all its forms, a narrative that flirts with the radical potentials of posthuman embodiment but ultimately safely contains them' (Cheyne, p. 151). This reading illustrates the importance of a disability-informed analysis and how it reveals and enhances the representation of disability and literary texts.

Reeve (2012a) claims this is the case for many representations of cyborgs in film and literature, where 'connections between disabled people and cultural icons are made when the word 'cyborg' is mentioned' (p. 99). However, there is space for more progressive representations of disability and cyborgs when disability, as a social construct, is present alongside impairment and impairment effects. Reeve (2012a) suggests, 'a more realistic account of living as a cyborg, with all its inherent problems... is closer to the lived experience of disability and impairment than is usual with science fiction cyborgs' (p. 101).

In disability studies, there are contesting views on cyborg theory. Scholars argue that cyborg theory can provide solutions to the material disadvantage that disabled people face (Reeve, 2012a). Some scholars also view the cyborg as a way of demonstrating the lack of boundary between disabled and non-disabled people, particularly because we are all dependent on technology in some way (Kafer, 2013). In addition, there

have been few attempts to adopt the cyborg figure in disability studies because of the dominant history of technology as a cure and the focus on normalising disability discourse (Goodley, 2010). As Kafer (2013) notes, cyborg theory celebrates technology intervention and the coupling of human and machine, which can perpetuate the ableist assumption that disabled bodies are broken and thus require fixing, reinforcing individual and medical views of disability.

Reeve (2012a) discusses Haraway's manifesto in relation to the lived experience of disability. She asserts that 'while many disabled people do have intimate relationships with technology...this playful transgressing of boundaries so favoured by Haraway, and subsequent theorists neglects the materiality of *disablism*' (p. 96). Further, Siebers (2008) argues that Haraway does not consider the reality of living as a cyborg, a hybrid of human and technology, specifically for people with impairments. He states:

Haraway's cyborgs are spunky, irreverent, and sexy; they accept with glee the ability to transgress old boundaries between machine and animal, male and female, and mind and body... Haraway is so preoccupied with power and ability that she forgets what disability is. Prostheses always increase the cyborg's abilities; they are a source only of new powers, never of problems. The cyborg is always more than human – and never risks to be seen as subhuman. To put it simply, the cyborg is not disabled. (Siebers, 2008, p. 63)

From this, Siebers argues that Haraway's cyborg figure does not address impairment effects (Thomas, 2007), the restrictions and pain caused by bodily variation and impairment. Consequently, Reeve (2012a) developed the concept of the *iCrip* to illustrate how cyborg theory can be used in disability studies to contextualise the experience and examine

representations of impaired cyborgs that unsettle the binaries between disabled, and non-disabled and normal and abnormal. The *iCrip*, therefore, provides new ways of being: (non)disabled and (ab)normal, which can change and improve as technology becomes more advanced and accessible. Furthermore, Reeve demonstrates how cyborg theory can help to generate productive new ways of thinking about subjectivity, gender, the maternity of the physical body *and* disability. In her concept of *iCrip*, Reeve (2012a) explains:

*iCrip* represents new ways of being, which are (non)disabled and (ab)normal. So for example, the ways in which impaired people incorporate their wheelchairs, prosthetics and canes into their corporeal and psychic sense of self produces new ways of being which are both (non)disabled and (ab)normal, which are *iCrip*... In addition, *iCrip* is subject to the problems associated with living as a human-machine hybrid discussed previously in this chapter, such as surveillance, stratification and hierarchies, control and dependence. (p. 106)

As the cyborg is a dominant figure in film representations, specifically moulded from individual and medical model assumptions of disability, the *iCrip* provides a helpful framework to interrogate such representations. By adopting the *iCrip*, the complex figure of the cyborg can be examined through a disability-informed analysis to critique embodiment and subjectivity productively (Cheyne, 2013; Reeve, 2012a).

Furthermore, Schalk (2016) calls for re-evaluating the supercrip stereotype so that future scholarship can 'interrogate supercrip representations in a variety of cultural arenas' (p. 84). In doing so, they identify three types of supercrip narratives. Firstly, a *regular* supercrip narrative which exemplifies the disabled person who can execute normal

tasks with technological aids. Secondly, the *glorified* supercrip narrative portrays accomplishments challenging the non-disabled. And finally, the *superpowered* supercrip emphasises a person's transhuman power. Schalk (2016) also builds upon Cheyne's (2013) claim that analysis of representations must consider the context of the genre. For example, representations that occur in a romance novel will differ from the conventions followed in a science fiction film. And thus, the genre may alter how the supercrip narrative appears or is critiqued.

The dominant images of the supercrip and cyborg perpetuate medical and individual views of disability. However, there is space for progressive and positive perspectives; as Haller (2010) asserts, inspirational content can empower individuals to overcome challenges and raise awareness about disability. But she argues that there is a difference between *inspiration porn* and *disability inspiration*. Inspiration porn is rooted in ableism and the perspective of the individual and medical models of disability. In contrast, disability inspiration includes 'inspiring activities that can be considered beyond the "norm" by all members of society' (Haller, 2010, p. 109) rather than just people with impairments. The difference, therefore, is between who is claiming what is considered inspirational and how it is framed. Furthermore, Grue (2016) states that certain stories can resonate with empowering and affirmative ideas associated with the disabled people's movement. This illustrates how the affirmation model of disability can work as a tool to reveal depictions of disability that counter the supercrip stereotype.

### **2.3.1.2 Disability as Evil**

Another stereotype frequently appearing in literary and film representations is the association between disability and evil. This is a longstanding trend that continues to play out in contemporary culture.

Shakespeare (1999) states, 'the use of disability as a character trait, plot device or atmosphere is a lazy shortcut' (p. 165), which includes disability as evil. The reliance on the disability as evil stereotype suggests that the media still views disability solely as a medical issue, focusing on impairment more than the individual. Villains are frequently represented as monstrous, impaired or deformed (Garland-Thomson, 1997) in horror, adventure and fantasy genres, which presents disability as an embodiment of evil. This is repeatedly used to depict villains as more sinister and criminal than they would be if they were able-bodied, emphasising a character's impairment or physical difference for dramatic effect (Longmore, 2003). And certainly, as Mitchell and Snyder (2000) suggest in their theory of narrative prosthesis, this speaks to the pervasive use of disability. In popular culture, this feeds into the trope of associating physical appearance with character traits. Physical appearances, differences and impairments are used to scare, incite, and remind the audience that good wins over evil. As Amanda Leduc (2020) argues:

In the medical model, disability is both a reality of life as well as a kind of storytelling. Every disabled story becomes a narrative – a story that has everything to do with what culture perceives of as good (able-bodiedness, beauty) and bad (disability, disfigurement), and how we, as a society, are supposed to act toward one another. (pp. 36-67)

Garland-Thomson (1997) states that 'formal conditions such as facial disfigurement, scarring, birthmarks, obesity, and visual or hearing impairments corrected with mechanical aids are usually socially disabling, even though they entail almost no physical dysfunction' (p. 14). This situates disability, including disfigurement, as a social problem rather than a medical issue which highlights how the experience of disability is



far beyond the medical and ingrained in the social aspects of having an impairment or physical difference. Longmore (2013) argues that portraying villains as disabled reinforces three prejudices: 'Disability is a punishment for evil, disabled people are embittered by their "fate" and disabled resent the nondisabled and would, if they could, destroy them' (p. 134). Furthermore, Barnes (1992) claims that 'The depiction of disabled people as essentially evil has been a particular favourite among filmmakers. The list of films which connect impairment to wickedness and villainy is virtually endless' (p. 11). Discussing its frequency in the crime genre, Cheyne (2019) asserts that the association of disability with criminal characters presents notions of disability as 'fearful and sinister, enhancing the anxiety which crime fiction seeks to evoke' (p. 70). This is also addressed by Longmore (2013), who claims that disabled villains are used to exaggerate their evilness and are often 'raging against their "fate" and hating those who have escaped such "affliction," often seek to retaliate against "normals"' (p. 133).

Disability, as understood in disability studies, is the treatment experienced by those with impairments or differences. These impairments or differences can be physical, mental, cognitive, visual or hearing, and bodily characteristics such as disfigurement and non-visible impairments. This is because the restrictions and attitudes that individuals with any of these conditions, differences or impairments face cause the construction and experience of disability (Oliver, 2013; Siebers, 2008). From this perspective, disability is an overarching category to explain the social and cultural construct in relation to someone's impairment or difference. It is clear, therefore, that the association between disability and evil is one of the most persistent stereotypes of disability. From classic literature to recent blockbuster films and media representations, disability as evil continues to dominate our cultural landscape. This perpetuates a negative

ideology of disability which can also harm real-life views of disability. Moreover, as Barnes (1999) claims, these images can impact 'public perceptions of people who experience emotional distress and, by implication, the disabled community as a whole' (p. 12).

### **2.3.1.3 Disability as Monstrous**

The stereotype of a disabled person as monstrous can be found in many horror films. Physical impairments and disfigurements are often used to characterise the disabled person as monstrous and Other. In this way, monstrosity is depicted in film representations through non-normative bodies and impairment, often in contrast to normative and able-bodied characters. As Garland-Thomson (1997) suggests, critics have often overlooked corporal otherness, including monstrosity, deformation and physical impairment. But she argues that the disabled and monstrous bodies can be viewed as deviant and other. Cheyne (2019) notes that in the horror genre, there is often a dichotomy where the disabled person is a monster/disabled person and a victim. However, certain texts have also done this to draw attention to the trope and its repetition in literature. Indeed, disabled characters are portrayed as monstrous to 'evoke fearful affects, whether fear of a disabled monster, fear for a vulnerable disabled character, or a cluster of related sensations including uneasiness, vulnerability, anxiety, repulsion, and revulsion' (Cheyne, 2019, p. 28) and this is also the case for films.

Alice and Ellis (2021) propose that the perception of monstrosity can also be viewed as socially constructed as it is a negative association imposed on top of people with physical impairments. In an analysis of *Shrek* (2001), Alice and Ellis (2021) claim that certain representations of monsters can be read through the affirmation model of disability. In this way, the character's monstrous features are celebrated. Furthermore,

they state that the ogre Shrek subverts the monstrous stereotype to 'critique the construction of normative characters and societies in children's narratives' (sec. 6). In doing so, they claim that 'the film draws on the affirmative model of disability and embraces disability pride through the personal journeys of its lead characters Shrek, Donkey and Fiona' (Alice & Ellis, 2021, sec. 6). The stories that portray disabled characters as monstrous in this way often do so to critique society, providing a social commentary on the treatment towards those with physical differences who are labelled monstrous. Characters are often excluded from society because of the fear of disability. For instance, Quasimodo from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or Lenny from *Of Mice and Men*. These characters are often viewed by showing this treatment as 'sympathetic monsters' (Longmore, 2003, p. 135). Nevertheless, the overriding depiction of disability as monstrous is regressive and relies on physical impairment, including disfigurement, to demonstrate the 'gross deformity of the [disabled] body' (Longmore, 2003, p. 135).

#### **2.3.1.4 Disability as Comic Relief and Humour**

Another common stereotype of disability is using disability for comic relief and humour. Indeed, Wilde (2018) claims that 'comedy and humour has played a major part in forming cultural attitudes towards disabled people, shaping disabled people's images of themselves' (p. 20). From the sideshow idiots to the villain's sidekicks, disabled characters have appeared as objects of humour, the source of amusement and the butt of the joke for centuries (Garland-Thomson, 1997). As Barnes (1999) argues, the mockery of disability is a key feature of many mainstream films and television shows. Conversely, recent scholarship and analysis attempts to challenge this stereotype by exploring disability humour, where disabled characters are not tragic or pitied but instead depicted on an equal level to other characters.

Berger (2016) discusses Reid et al.'s (2006) important claim that there are two forms of humour relating to disability, 'disabling humour and disability humour' (p.178). The former is associated with negative, ableist and condescending views of disability compared to the latter, which refers to humour that enlightens and affirms the disabled person. Berger (2016) states, 'it is essentially the difference between laughing *at* them or laughing *with* them, and whether non-disabled characters or ableist attitudes and practices are positioned to be the source of humor in situations with disabled characters' (p. 178). This is echoed by Pritchard (2021c), who argues that certain portrayals can be productive by showing the negative social attitudes towards disability and, thus, providing a social commentary on disability for the viewer. For instance, Pritchard (2021) analysed characters with dwarfism in *Family Guy* and suggests that the animated television show has the 'potential to challenge social attitudes towards people with dwarfism and the way they are perceived in society through directing the humour towards those who mock them as opposed to those with dwarfism' (p. 1). In Disney animated films, on the other hand, scholars have recognised a reliance on using disability as comic relief. Characters with intellectual or cognitive impairments have been identified as objects of ridicule, where they are made the butt of the joke and laughed at (Schwartz et al., 2013). I discuss this in more detail in section 2.5.2. As such, this demonstrates a complex relationship between disability and humour. Nevertheless, identifying disability humour versus disabling humour provides a useful framework for identifying the negative and stereotypical portrayals of disability as comic relief compared to humour, which can provide a social commentary on disability (Haller, 2010; Prichard, 2021).

## 2.4 Disability in Fairy Tales

Ann Schmiesing (2014) claims that it is no surprise that fairy tales portray disability so frequently because narratives 'not only often use physical ability or beauty to accentuate a character's moral virtues or other positive traits but also employ physical impairment as a mark that signifies evildoers or further ostracizes the marginalized' (p.1) Through this narrative perspective, protagonists are able-bodied and contrasted with antagonists who more often than not, exhibit or are punished with impairment. When a protagonist is impaired, it becomes their narrative arc to overcome as they must 'triumph despite the social stigma of disability – a triumph typically rewarded in fairy tales with the magical erasure of physical anomaly' (Schmiesing, 2014, p. 2). This aligns with the medical model of disability, which seeks to cure or fix the impairment to return to the norm. Fairy tales follow this narrative pattern of disability which Leduc (2020) asserts involves 'problem, quest, return. In the medical model, the "return" involves the acquisition/reacquisition of an able-bodied life' (p. 37). The basic narrative plot of the fairy tale also illustrates the dependency on disability as highlighted in narrative prosthesis (Mitchell and Snyder, 2000).

Fairy tales, notes Jack Zipes (2012), 'play an intricate role in articulation...in forming and reflecting the tastes, manners, and ideologies of members of a particular society' (p. ix) They continue to permeate our culture and serve a function in 'communicating the values and the various preoccupations of different nations' (p. ix). Fairy tales originated as informative tales told orally before being written, printed, painted, performed, recorded and filmed. However, Zipes (2012) notes that folklorists distinguish between wonder folk tales and literary fairy tales. Wonder folk tales originated in oral traditions around the world and still exist in this way. In contrast, literary tales 'emanated from the oral

traditions through the mediation of manuscripts and print and continue to be created today in various mediated forms throughout the world' (Zipes, 2012, p. x). Indeed, the fairy tale has been transformed and mediated into a wide range of contemporary communication outputs, from musicals, plays and toys to films and television programmes. Furthermore, Disney has a rich history of adapting fairy tales, from their first animated shorts to their recent animated features, live-action films and television series (Wasko, 2020).

In an examination of the representation of disability in five fairy tale story books, Hodkinson and Park (2017) found several consistent themes, including the concept of normalcy, emphasis on physical appearance, avoidance of disability or disability as a sign of evil, and a happy ever after ending. The authors argue that these tales depict 'ableist assumptions and oppressive attitudes towards disability' (Hodkinson & Park, 2017, p. 48) which they suggest could play a role in the attitudes toward disability in society. The key narrative components of a fairy tale are often connected with disability in some way. For instance, as Schmiesing (2014) claims, disability in fairy tales often serves as a punishment for bad behaviour or to exaggerate the adversity against the protagonist. In addition, the happy ending often includes a magical transformation back to physical normalcy and consequently overcoming the problem of disability. Thus, disability is highly prevalent in fairy tales. When these narratives are analysed through a disability studies perspective, one can uncover the wide range of disabled characters and underlying messages relating to appearance, impairment, overcoming, and good/evil dichotomies reinforcing individual and medical model views of disability. In addition, Schmiesing (2014) claims the importance of this by asserting:

When applied to the fanciful realm of fairy tales... those who populate European fairy tales include thumb-sized children, dwarfs, blinded stepsisters, wounded soldiers, characters temporarily paralyzed by a spell or put into a coma-like sleep, “dummy” characters who may represent intellectual impairments, mute maidens, animals born to human parents, and the many human-animal hybrids. (pp. 105 – 106)

This reveals the numerous types of disabled characters that populate fairy tales. Furthermore, because many of Disney’s animated films are based on fairy tales, this study has considered the differences between the original tale and the Disney adaptation in relation to its treatment of disability.

## **2.5 Disney Studies: Why Study Disney?**

As I have previously discussed in the introduction, since founded in 1923, the Walt Disney Company has become one of the leading corporations in the animation industry, as well as live-action and television, merchandise, and theme parks. The company has diversified and expanded throughout its history growing into a billion-dollar global corporation (Wasko, 2020). Disney’s cultural influence is, therefore, widespread. The Disney corporation has acquired large media companies and franchises, including Pixar, Lucasfilm, Marvel, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fox, leading to the name ‘The Disney Multiverse’ (Wasko, 2020, p. 2). This refers to the totality of the Disney conglomerate. Indeed, they continue to expand their products with Disney Plus as a key example. The success of Disney Plus, its streaming platform, which has surpassed 152 million subscribers (Palmer, 2022), demonstrates its dominance in the media landscape, making Disney products a commercial and cultural phenomenon around the world. Because of this, Disney products have great potential to shape and impact

our lives. As Disney studies scholar Amy Davis (2019) suggests in her edited collection, *Discussing Disney*, 'in discussing Disney, we are discussing not just a film studio, not just a corporation, but a significant aspect of western popular culture. To not discuss it is to ignore one of the greatest forces of the twentieth and twenty-first century' (Davis, 2019, p. 13). As such, Disney's power and influence cannot be overlooked and must be interrogated and critically analysed.

Disney cartoons, short films and animated features have been of critical attention since they were first released in the 1920s (Wasko, 2020). One of the first publications on Walt Disney's life was written and published by Richard Schickel (1968) two years after Walt Disney's death. Following this, Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart (1971;1975) published *How to Read Donald Duck* in 1971, which was once banned and faced backlash with publishers refusing to pick up the project for fear of criticising Disney. The book, which has since been re-released (Dorfman & Mattelart, 2018), critiques the Donald Duck comics distributed in Chile. It argues, through Marxist analyses of class and imperialism, that the comics, and Disney more generally, operate through a capitalist ideology (Budd & Kirsch, 2005). However, it was not until the 1990s that Disney studies began to flourish. Although critiques of Disney products already existed, there was now a scholarly focus where academics developed an interest in critically analysing popular culture products, with many focusing on Disney. Budd (2005) argues that Disney studies started with academics producing detailed analyses for small academic audiences. An advantage of this was that these academics had grown up with Disney. Therefore, their work aimed 'to understand why people, perhaps including at least part of themselves, actually liked, even needed Disney— without attacking, demonizing, or condescending those people' (Budd, 2005, p. 12). The Disney scholarship that subsequently followed helped to shape



Disney studies into an academic discipline that enables scholars to research, analyse and interrogate one of the largest entertainment conglomerates whose products are recognised, beloved and critiqued by many around the world.

In 1994, Henry A. Giroux published *Animating Youth: The Disneyfication of Children's Culture*. In the text he states, 'Disney films combine an ideology of enchantment and aura of innocence in narrating stories that help children understand who they are, what societies are about, and what it means to construct a world of play and fantasy in an adult environment' (Giroux, 1994, p. 66). Giroux subsequently published *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* in 1999, and the second edition revised and updated many of his arguments alongside scholar Grace Pollock (2010). In this publication, Giroux and Pollock (2010) emphasise the importance of treating Disney's animated films as 'teaching machines' (p. 91). They claim that 'the educational relevance of animated films makes it all the more necessary to move beyond treating these films as transparent entertainment and to question the diverse, often contradictory, messages that constitute Disney's worldview' (p. 92). This crucial viewpoint provides the context and reasoning for my research, emphasising the importance of critically analysing Disney animated films because of the messages they contain and their potential to influence viewers. Giroux and Pollock's (2010) central argument is that Disney films must be interrogated because they not only help children learn who they are and what society is about but also feature conservative views and traditional stereotypes. Indeed, they note that 'issues regarding representational politics of gender, race, class, caste, [disability] and other aspects of self and collective identity are defining elements of Disney films for children and youth' (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 126). And therefore, 'revealing and exploring the ideological nature of

Disney' will allow 'further opportunities... to use such texts to encourage meaningful critical engagement instead of simply passive absorption' (p. 126).

Following this, Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells published an edited collection, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* (1995), where scholars analysed and critiqued Disney films from a range of different perspectives. In the introduction, they discuss how Disney films are often described as pure entertainment and identify four common pardons that are used when enjoying a Disney film, 'it is only for children, it is only fantasy, it is only a cartoon and it is just good business' (Bell et al., 1995, p. 4). Through this, nostalgia and innocence are often used as reasons to deflect any criticism of Disney films. However, it is imperative to look beyond these aspects to uncover Disney's 'sanitisation' of social, cultural, and political ideologies and representations. As Bell et al. (1995) state, 'Disney's trademarked innocence operates on a systematic sanitization of violence, sexuality, and political struggle concomitant with an erasure or repression of difference' (p. 7). And thus, critiquing Disney from a social justice viewpoint - as this thesis does through the lens of disability studies - is crucial to uncover the representations that often go unnoticed. Indeed, Wasko addresses the challenge of studying Disney because its products are synonymous with pleasure, innocence, and fantasy. She notes, 'there is a general sense that its products are *only entertainment*' and further states, 'why should [Disney] be taken so seriously? As we're told continuously, it's just entertainment' (Wasko, 2020, p. 4). This demonstrates the dominant response to Disney and its products, with many overlooking their potential to influence our conceptions and shape how we live and think about the world. However, as Wasko (2020) further asserts:

It is important to consider the Disney phenomenon seriously and to insist that it is a legitimate focal point for cultural and social analysis. It is appropriate not only to look more closely at the Disney company and its products but also to critique their role in our culture. Indeed, with the proliferation of Disney products and the diversification of corporate activities, one must insist that Disney is fair game for serious critical review. (p. 14)

This provides the justification as to why studying Disney is so important. Mainly because the company continues to expand and diversify their products and attract new audiences, and thus, its global dominance remains and continues to grow. I focus specifically on Disney animated feature films because they are often audiences 'first introduction into the world of Disney' (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 86). Additionally, Giroux and Pollock (2010) argue that Disney's animated films must be interrogated as a critical site for the production of children's culture and that, consequently, Disney should be both engaged with and challenged critically because of its influence on the corporate and cultural landscapes. This, I believe, is therefore too powerful to dismiss.

### **2.5.1 The Classic Disney Model**

In Wasko's essential Disney studies text *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (2001; 2020), she provides a detailed analysis of the 'Disney Multiverse' including an overview of the company's history, a political economy analysis of Disney as a corporation, a review of existing scholarship and techniques used to analyse Disney films and theme parks, as well as scholarship on audiences and Disney fans. The chapter on analysing the world according to Disney is particularly interesting as Wasko (2020) introduces the 'Classic Disney Model' (p. 122). Characteristics of the model first emerged as early as Disney's first

cartoons in the 1920s and 1930s. The model highlights the styles, stories, characters, and themes/values frequently utilised in Disney's cartoons, short films, and animated feature films. The Classic Disney Model includes the following:

- Style: light entertainment; music; humour (physical gags and slapstick).
- Story: often revised fairy tales or folklore; classic Hollywood cinema model.
- Characters: anthropomorphised; neotenized animal characters; formulaic heroines, heroes, villains, and sidekicks; stereotypical representations of gender and ethnicity.
- Themes/Values: mainstream American values; individualism; work ethic; optimism; escape, fantasy, magic, imagination; innocence; romance, happiness; good over evil. (Wasko, 2020, pp. 103-104)

Furthermore, Wasko (2020) updated the Classic Disney Model following the changes to some of the values, meanings and representations in more recent Disney films. This revision, called the *Revised Classic Disney Model*, developed due to improvements to representations, particularly of the Disney Princesses, during the 1990s. This time period is known as Disney's Renaissance era. Table 2 illustrates the different eras of the Disney company in relation to their animated film outputs. The Disney Renaissance era, for example, is the period between 1989 and 1999, beginning with the release of *The Little Mermaid*. This period is known for Disney re-establishing its dominance after a less successful period during the 1970s and 1980s, known as the Dark or Bronze era. In addition, the Renaissance era saw a noticeable change in the representation of gender and race, where princesses such as Ariel and Belle were more independent and empowered than previous princesses of the Golden Era,

such as Snow White and Cinderella. (Wasko, 2020; Mollet, 2021; Davis, 2006).

Table 2 - Eras of Disney Animated Films (Wasko, 2020)

<b>Dates</b>	<b>Era</b>	<b>Films</b>
1937 – 1942	The Classic or Golden	<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i> (1937); <i>Pinocchio</i> (1940); <i>Fantasia</i> (1940); <i>Dumbo</i> (1941); <i>Bambi</i> (1942)
1942 – 1950	The Package or Wartime	<i>Saludos Amigos</i> (1942); <i>The Three Caballeros</i> (1944); <i>Make Music Mine</i> (1946); <i>Fun and Fancy Free</i> (1947); <i>Melody Time</i> (1948); <i>The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad</i> (1949)
1950 – 1969	The Silver	<i>Cinderella</i> (1950); <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> (1951); <i>Peter Pan</i> (1953); <i>Lady and the Tramp</i> (1955);

		<i>Sleeping Beauty</i> (1959); <i>One Hundred and One Dalmatians</i> (1961); <i>The Sword in the Stone</i> (1963); <i>The Jungle Book</i> (1967)
1970 – 1988	The Dark or Bronze	<i>The Aristocats</i> (1970); <i>Robin Hood</i> (1973); <i>The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh</i> (1977); <i>The Rescuers</i> (1977); <i>The Fox and the Hound</i> (1981); <i>The Black Cauldron</i> (1985); <i>The Great Mouse Detective</i> (1986); <i>Oliver &amp; Company</i> (1988)
1989 – 1999	The Renaissance	<i>The Little Mermaid</i> (1989); <i>The Rescuers Down Under</i> (1990); <i>Beauty and the Beast</i> (1991); <i>Aladdin</i> (1992); <i>The Lion King</i> (1994); <i>Pocahontas</i> (1995); <i>The Hunchback of Notre</i>

		<i>Dame</i> (1996); <i>Hercules</i> (1997); <i>Mulan</i> (1998); <i>Tarzan</i> (1999)
1999 – 2008	The Post Renaissance	<i>Fantasia 2000</i> (2000); <i>Dinosaur</i> (2000); <i>The Emperor’s New Groove</i> (2000); <i>Atlantis: The Lost Empire</i> (2001); <i>Lilo &amp; Stitch</i> (2002); <i>Treasure Planet</i> (2002); <i>Brother Bear</i> (2003); <i>Home on the Range</i> (2004); <i>Chicken Little</i> (2005); <i>Meet the Robinsons</i> (2007)
2009 – Present	The New Revival	<i>Bolt</i> (2008); <i>The Princess and the Frog</i> (2009); <i>Tangled</i> (2010); <i>Winnie the Pooh</i> (2011); <i>Wreck-It Ralph</i> (2012); <i>Frozen</i> (2013); <i>Big Hero 6</i> (2014); <i>Zootopia</i> (2016); <i>Moana</i> (2016)

## 2.5.2 What is Disneyfication?

Disney's adaptation of fairy tales and folklore is also known as *Disneyfication*, a process of sanitisation and Americanisation that occurs to the story, characters, and plot (Wasko, 2020). This process was identified by Schickel (1968) as a technique that was often criticised for its simplicity. However, it is a process of turning the original material into popular culture by Disney. As a result, Disney's versions of these fairy tales are often better known than the original ones due to Disney's commercial success and popularity (Zipes, 1995). Indeed, Hurley (2005) suggests that 'the visual representation of fairy tale characters has been dominated by the Disney version of these tales' (p. 222) because Disney films are the most popular reinterpretations of traditional fairy tales. And therefore, 'children tend to believe that Disney's version of the fairy tale is the real story' (Hurley, 2005, p. 222). Furthermore, Meamber (2011) describes Disneyfication as an 'approach to literature and history that simplifies and cleanses an object of unpleasantness' (p. 127). And thus, the original texts that Disney chose to adapt have gone through a process of simplification, which renders the story so that it is more suitable for a family-friendly audience.

The process of Disneyfication is particularly evident in Disney's fairy tale adaptations. Zipes (1995) asserts, 'Disney employed the most up-to-date technological means and used his own "American" grit and ingenuity to appropriate European fairy tales' (p. 21). Indeed, the studio has transformed fairy tales since their first animated short films *Puss in Boots* and *Cinderella*, in the 1920s. Fairy tale adaptations span the company's 100-year history, with their first animated feature-length film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, an adaptation of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tale, released in 1937 to one of their most recent animated films, *Frozen* released in 2013 which is an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy



tale, *The Snow Queen*. Scholars have analysed Disney fairy tale films from a range of perspectives, including Disney's sanitisation of fairy tales (Zipes, 2007), the change in the representation of gender (Davis, 2006; Whelan, 2014) and the relationship between Disney products and the American dream (Mollet, 2021). Such sanitisation of the original tales transforms Disney films into American products for marketing and merchandising (Budd & Kirsch, 2005; Giroux, 1994). As Wasko (2020) notes, 'Disney's manipulation of children's stories typically entailed profound changes in the original theme and characters, as well as the cultural and geographic settings' (p. 136). The process of Disneyfication involving the sanitisation of stories can contradict the meaning of the original tale. Scholars have argued that this distorts the intent of the original tale, which often had moral principles associated with it. Instead, Disney films focused on other parts of the story for entertainment value. Zipes (1999) strongly argues that Disney violated the fairy tales, defeating the original purpose as he states Disney 'robs the literary tale of its voice and changes its form and meaning' (p. 344). In doing so, Zipes argues that Disney manipulates his audience, catching their attention with brightly coloured images and musical sounds. These elements, in addition to simplistic stories and characters, particularly in the older fairy tale films, are characteristics of the Classic Disney Model and are argued as contributing to the inaccurate adaptations of fairy tales (Zipes, 1995).

Disneyfication is described by Leduc (2020) as a process where 'happy endings became even happier, and the darker elements of traditional tales were passed over in favour of less controversial storylines' (p. 85). Amanda Leduc's insightful book *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space* explores how frequently disability appears in fairy tales by questioning 'why fairy tales, narratives so often associated with seeming empowerment, have provided a breeding ground

for anti-disability narrative; and how the allure and the potency of these stories have continued to influence the perceptions of disability today' (p. 12). With a focus on fairy tales and Disney's adaptations, Leduc reveals the dominance of disability narratives in these stories. And she notes that during the Disneyfication of such texts, an element of disability is often used for comic or tragic effect.

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was the first ever animated fairy tale film (Zipes, 1999) and Disney's first feature-length animated film. The film is an adaptation of the Brothers Grimm's nineteenth-century German fairy tale and has been described as an 'embodiment of the Disney formula' (Holliday & Pallant, 2021, p. 5). Indeed, the film remains one of the most historically significant and discussed films of all time (Holliday & Pallant, 2021) and has grossed nearly \$420 million (Watson, 2020). Scholars have argued that *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* defined the fairy tale genre (Zipes, 1995) and helped to establish the Classic Disney Model (Holliday & Pallant, 2021; Wasko, 2020). In his chapter *Breaking the Disney Spell*, Zipes (1995) details the numerous changes that Disney made to the Grimms' original tale. These match many of the characteristics of the Classic Disney Model, including cute and archetypal characters, themes of good over evil, optimism and work ethic, and musical numbers. In particular, the seven dwarfs were given names and personalities and played a major role in the Disney film, whereas in the original tale, they were minor anonymous characters (Watson, 2020; Zipes, 1995). In addition, in Disney's version, there is an increased focus on the dwarfs following their adventures, involving comic antics and musical numbers such as 'Whistle While You Work.' Wasko (2020) states that on a technical level, the change which saw the dwarfs animated as less-than-human related to the limitations of animation because animating human characters at this time, during the 1930s, was

rather difficult. She states, 'the more cartoonish dwarfs provided comic relief by way of gags, mostly physical and slapstick, and thus actually dominated much of the film' (2020, p. 140).

On the other hand, Watson (2020) argues that the dwarfs were not treated as humans alongside other human characters like Snow White, the Evil Queen, and the prince. Instead, they were animated using similar conventions when creating and animating anthropomorphic characters. And thus, this emphasises the dehumanisation often associated with disabled characters (Smith, 2018). Watson further argues that although the dwarfs have been individualised with personality traits, how they were drawn and animated exaggerates their non-normative features. She notes that the Disney style (another term for the Classic Disney Model) reinforces traditional values, including 'the notion that people with dwarfism are not fully human, but distinctly other' (Watson, 2020, p. 144). Moreover, Watson (2020) states the depiction of the seven dwarfs in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is important because 'cultural representations matter, and although these films are eighty years old, their popularity continue to influence the lived experience of people with dwarfism [and disability in general]' (p. 150).

Similarly, Mintz (2020) argues the dwarfs are positioned in a 'perpetual state of childlike innocence and ignorance' (p. 61) and claims that Dopey, in particular, is an exemplary depiction of the medical model of disability that exists for comic relief. Dopey was also recognised by Schwartz et al. (2013) as significantly different from the other dwarfs. He is animated with characteristics to perpetuate childlike and animalistic qualities, and consequently, he is depicted as other (Schwartz et al., 2013; Watson, 2020). Indeed, Dopey is not only a character with dwarfism, but he is also mute and given 'big ears, hard to miss eyes, and [a] larger than life grin [which] are reminiscent of physical features often

associated with young children who have Down syndrome' (Mintz, 2020, p. 61) and attributed to intellectual disability (Schwartz et al., 2013). From this, they argue the importance of uncovering disabling narratives in films such as Disney's and claim:

It is very dangerous to accept these kinds of portrayals without questioning why they exist and what purpose they serve. Therefore, the rationale of critical analysis is to encourage people to think about these issues and challenge stereotypical portrayals as a way of creating greater acceptance of and respect for difference in our society. (Schwartz et al., 2013, p. 191)

The rationale for this study - analysing the representation of disability in Disney animated films - follows this assertion by Schwartz et al. (2013) that critical analysis is imperative to challenge stereotypical portrayals of disability. Indeed, because of Disney's global audience, the stereotypical portrayals of the seven dwarfs continue to be problematic today. This proves the importance of analysing all of Disney's animated films for their portrayal of disability. The worldwide success of Disney Plus has made Disney animated films, including those from the 1930s, such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, more accessible than ever before. It is argued that these films are ubiquitous with children (Giroux, 1994; Sandlin & Garlen, 2017), and therefore audiences, particularly families and children will learn about disability from such portrayals (Norden, 2013). Watson (2020) concludes in her article on the representation of dwarfism in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* that the film 'teaches audiences that people with dwarfism are funny looking and child-like and that it is okay to laugh at them' (p. 145). Additionally, Pritchard (2021a) discusses the impact that cultural portrayals of dwarfism, particularly in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, have on how people with dwarfism are treated in society. Through interviews with people with dwarfism, she

discusses how these depictions play a central role in society's understanding and treatment of dwarfism. Consequently, individuals with dwarfism discuss their experience of being whistled or sung at because members of the public have mimicked the songs to them that the dwarfs sing in the Disney film (Pritchard, 2021b). This shows how members of the public not only associate people with dwarfism with Disney's seven dwarfs but also how this influences the treatment of people with dwarfism.

### **2.5.3 Interrogating Representations in Disney Animated Films**

Analysing representations in Disney animated films has been a rich scholarly focus in Disney studies. The most attention has been given to gender (Davis, 2011; Decker, 2010; England et al., 2011; Gillam & Wooden, 2008; Hoerrner, 1996; Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003; Streiff & Dundes, 2017; Wiersma, 2000) and feminism (Craven, 2016; Davis, 2005; Kailash & Reed, 2018; Muir, 2022; Passanante Elman, 2020). Wasko (2020) asserts that the increased attention to feminist critiques of Disney films draws parallels with the rise of feminist theory in the 1980s. This was in addition to the release of films such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, which prompted more feminist analyses, mainly because Ariel was considered a Disney princess with more agency and independence (Davis, 2011; Mollet, 2020). Davis (2014; 2006b) has contributed some of the seminal texts focusing on representation in Disney studies. In particular, in her books *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Changing Representations of Women in Disney's Feature Animation* and *Handsome Heroes and Vile Villains: Masculinity in Disney's Feature Films*, she discusses the representation of gender through feminist theory and masculinity studies.

Although gender and aspects relating to gender, such as feminism, are most common in Disney studies, it is far from the only critical topic of analysis. For example, there has been a range of research focusing on protected characteristics such as race and ethnicity (Brode, 2005; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2008; Towbin et al., 2004; Willets, 2013), age (Atkinson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2007; Towbin et al., 2004; Zurcher & Robinson, 2018), family (Holcomb et al., 2015; Tanner et al., 2003; Zurcher et al., 2018) and sexuality (Fan, 2019; Key, 2015; Llompарт & Brugué, 2020; Perea, 2018). In addition, there have been other analyses ranging from death and coping mechanisms (Graham et al., 2018), sexist language (Begum, 1998), indirect aggression (Coyne & Whitehead, 2008), prosocial behaviour (Padilla-Walker et al., 2013), nature (Whitley, 2008) and animal harm (Stanton, 2019). This highlights the wide range of scholarship in Disney studies and the focus on real issues in analysing these films, potentially impacting viewers' perceptions. In doing so, these scholars, who are potentially Disney fans, move beyond the nostalgia and pleasure associated with the films to analyse them critically.

#### **2.5.4 Disney Theme Park Scholarship**

In addition to Disney studies scholarship focusing on animated films, many scholars have analysed the Disney theme parks to 'understand their meanings and significance as sites of contemporary American culture' (Wasko, 2020, p. 140). Analysis has been conducted from various disciplines, including cultural studies, history, fan studies, art, geography, gender studies and urban planning. The Disney theme parks provide a space for the Walt Disney Company to 'commodify, market and profit' (Sandlin & Garlen, 2016, p. 12) from the stories and characters populated in their animated films. Alan Bryman (1999) researched the Disney theme parks and coined the term *Disneyization* to describe 'the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more

and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world' (p. 2). This term and process is similar to Disneyfication but focuses on Disney theme parks to emphasise their dominance and cultural influence, particularly in American and Western society.

There are 12 Disney theme parks around the world. In the United States, there are two theme parks at the Disneyland Resort in California and four theme parks at Walt Disney World in Florida. There are also two theme parks at Disneyland Paris in France, two theme parks at Tokyo Disney Resort in Japan, one theme park at Hong Kong International Resort in Hong Kong and one at Shanghai Disney Resort in China. Their first park, Disneyland, opened in 1955. Consequently, Disney parks have a vast history and have attracted much scholarly focus. Although it is impossible to explore in detail here, it is useful to evidence some of the studies that have analysed the parks, specifically from fan studies and disability studies perspectives, which are relevant to this thesis. As Wasko (2020) claims, Disney theme parks are central to the Disney Multiverse and play a vital role in connecting fans with characters, stories and merchandise in one place. But also, as Bryman (1999) critically reminds us, 'consumption is presented as an aspect of the fun and fantasy. To become a full participant, the visitor needs to consume' (p. 156). Indeed, becoming a full participant in a Disney theme park requires consuming; however, consuming also requires money and accessibility. As Mittermeier (2020) argues in *A Cultural History of the Disneyland Theme Parks: Middle-Class Kingdoms*, the Disney parks, specifically Disneyland, have always targeted the middle to the upper class. In doing so, it has shaped the theme parks design and reception as well as their progress and failures. Nevertheless, as the Disney company continues to diversify and expand, Disney parks will also continue to do so, which provides 'people's longing for escapism, for entertainment, [and] for leisure' (Mittermeier,

2020, p. 187). However, this is only an option for a select group of people from a certain social class.

Accessibility in the Disney parks is vital for visitors with impairments 'to engage in and display their fandom' (William, 2020, p. 244). But unfortunately, there is little scholarly work analysing accessibility in Disney theme parks. Even though the theme parks provide a wide range of services for disabled people and have a strong connection to charities such as the Make-A-Wish Foundation (Levy, 2021), scholarly work on disability and theme parks is limited. One article titled *Is Disney Disabling?* (Mintz, 2018) suggests that ongoing lawsuits against the parks, particularly from individuals with autism and their families, illuminates 'an ethical dilemma about the appropriate scope of disability equality' (p. 1366). Mintz argues that all disabled people are treated similarly regardless of impairment. This is an important concern because the experience in a theme park will differ immensely between a person with a physical impairment accessing the park in a wheelchair and, for example, a child with autism who may find it difficult to stand in a queue for a long time. He suggests that equal access in Disney theme parks should address a range of impairments on the same level.

As a Disney fan and theme park visitor, I support Mintz's (2018) argument but also want to highlight that, from my own experiences, Disney parks are very accessible. However, I can only speak from the experience of accessing the parks with a wheelchair. Hence, I believe that autoethnographic research would be valuable. On my recent trip to the Disney parks, I conducted autoethnographic research to examine the accessibility of the theme parks, which contributed to the findings presented in a paper titled *The Most Accessible Place on Earth? An Analysis of Accessibility in Walt Disney World Theme Parks* at the Popular Culture Association conference (2022). Autoethnography allows the



researcher to record personal experiences and create a critical narrative for the reader (Muir, 2022). By doing this, researchers can also adopt the social model of disability to ensure that the analysis is emancipatory. Although outside of the scope of this thesis, accessibility in Disney theme parks is something that I aim to explore more in the future because of the importance between disability, fandom and theme parks.

### **2.5.5 Disney Beyond Disney Studies**

In this thesis so far, I have discussed the global dominance that the Walt Disney Company holds and from a social justice viewpoint, it is important that the company speak about, and have policies in place, for issues on representation and diversity more generally. By looking at the Walt Disney Company's website and social media channels, it is clear that they are speaking out about their commitment towards social issues and emphasising their corporate stance, particularly on issues relating to diversity and inclusion. On the Walt Disney Company website homepage, they have a section called social responsibility which takes users to a webpage with information about diversity & inclusion, environment, charitable giving, workforce, operating responsibility, impact stories and a link to the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) report. In the report, the Walt Disney Company provides a thorough account of their commitments towards informing, inspiring and engaging audiences around the world. The report provides detailed information under three focus areas: World of Belonging (diversity, equity & inclusion), World in Balance (environment and conservation), and World of Hope (community) as well as two foundational pillars: Investing in Our People and Operating Responsibility. As shown in Figure 1 below, they state that 'Disney strives to inspire a world of belonging by embracing broad representation and respect for every individual in our workplace, storytelling, and communities; a world in balance by taking action to create a cleaner,

safer, and healthier world; and a world of hope by supporting our communities, especially children. We are also investing in our people and operating responsibly' (The Walt Disney Company, 2022, p. 6).

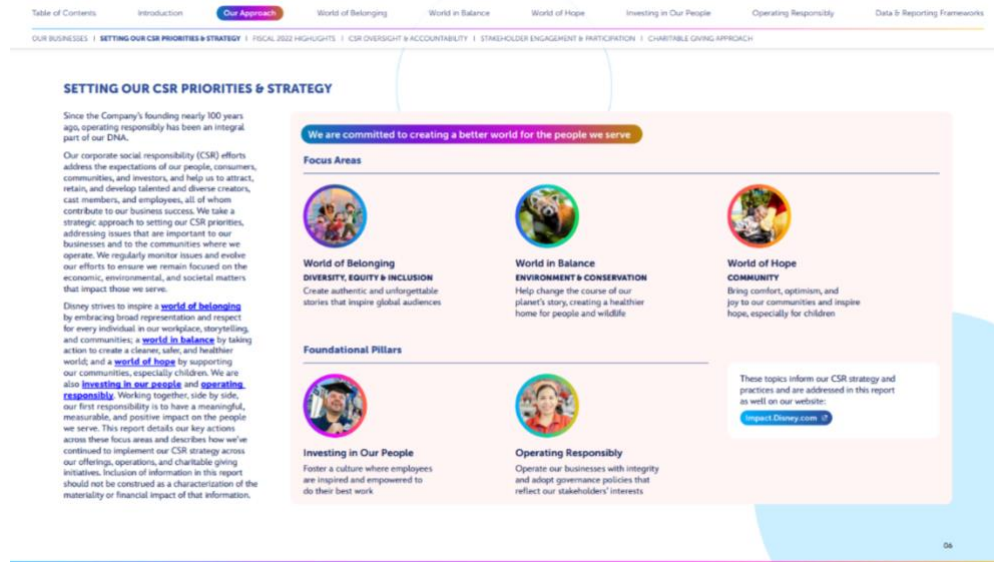


Figure 1 - The Walt Disney Company's 2022 Corporate Social Responsibility Report setting out the company's priorities and strategies.

For disability representation in particular, Disney report on the improvements that have been made to their content, experiences and products. As shown in Figure 2, there are a number of feature articles on accessible experiences where Disney discuss the accessibility services available at Walt Disney World theme parks as well as inclusive offerings and experiences. This includes the addition of wheelchair users in shows and attractions, specifically, the attraction It's a Small World which features animatronic dolls from around the world and now includes dolls

in wheelchairs, as well as wheelchair dancers performing in a wheelchair flash-mob dance in Shanghai Disney Resort.

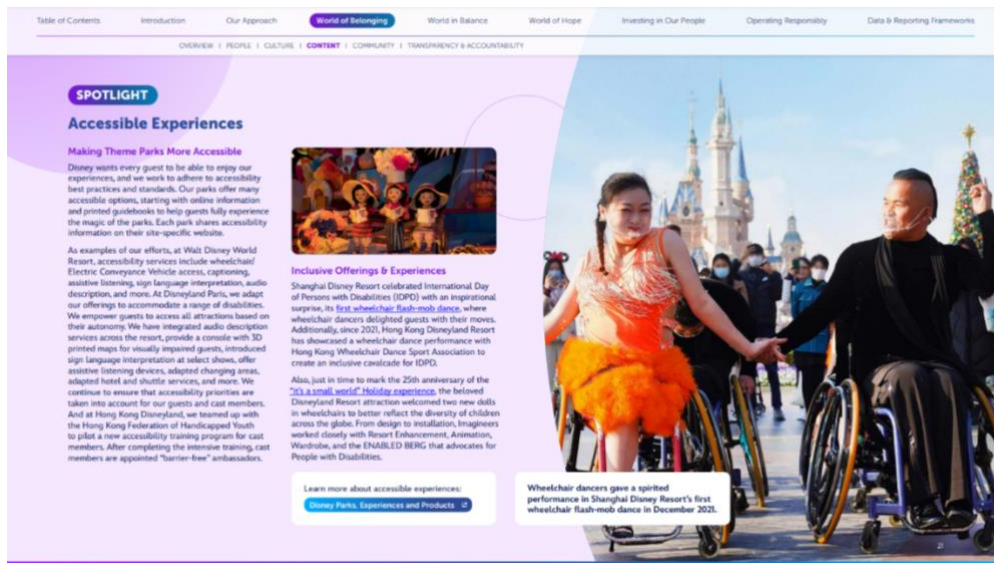


Figure 2 - Accessible Experiences in the Walt Disney Company's 2022 Corporate Social Responsibility Report.

For accessible content, Disney reports that they have accessible features on their streaming services, Disney songs in sign language and have featured the first deaf superhero in Marvel Studios' *Eternals* as shown in Figure 3. Supporting this, Disney states how they have worked with disability organisations for advice and guidance to ensure they are making their products and experiences inclusive in the best way possible.

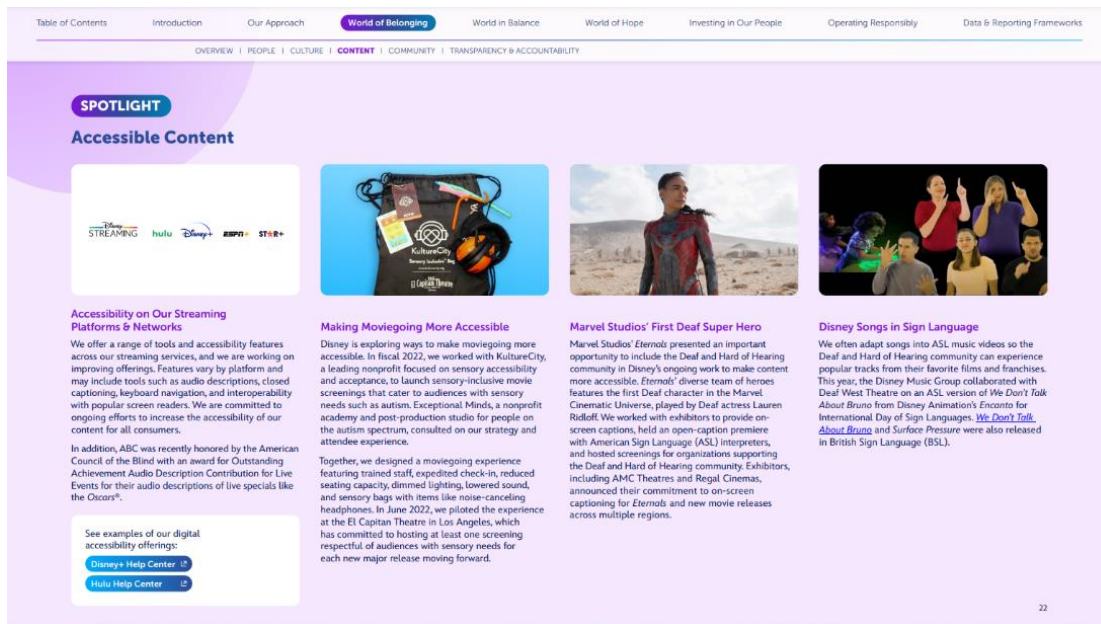


Figure 3 - Accessible Content in the Walt Disney Company's 2022 Corporate Social Responsibility Report.

For Disney's animated films in particular, it is clear that Disney are aware of the problematic outdated depictions that feature in some of the older films, namely *Peter Pan*, *Dumbo* and *The Aristocats*. These cultural stereotypes have forced Disney to speak out about them and provide content warnings before the films on Disney Plus to warn the audience. The content warning states:

This program includes negative depictions and/or mistreatment of people or cultures. These stereotypes were wrong then and are wrong now. Rather than remove this content, we want to acknowledge its harmful impact, learn from it and spark conversation to create a more inclusive future together.

From this, it is evident that Disney are attempting to create more inclusive content and products as well as showing their awareness of their own history of representations which can now be considered stereotypical and harmful as they represent a view of the world in the period in history in which they were created. With 100 years of history, it is clear that the

company has grown into a multimedia conglomerate, and it will be interesting to see what the future holds for the company and the products and content it creates in relation to diversity issues and specifically disability representation.

## **2.6 Disney Studies meets Disability Studies**

As I have illustrated, many scholars have focused on different aspects of representation. However, disability is often overlooked or at least it is the less critiqued protected characteristic in the analysis of representation in Disney animated films. This is supported by Holcomb and Latham-Mintus (2022) who assert that there has been less consideration given to the portrayals of disability than race, gender, and age. However, several analyses of the representation of disability in Disney animated films have often focused on specific characters and films. For example, Smith (2018) explored disability representation in *Beauty and the Beast*, arguing that Disney continues to promote negative images of the disabled body. In addition, Sebring and Greenhill (2020) have explored compulsory able-bodiedness in *The Little Mermaid* and *The Little Mermaid II: Return to the Sea* and argue how the films offer different narratives of 'imagined futures, defying normative conventions, and bringing societal' (p. 271). And Helm (2022) argues that the narratives in live-action films *Maleficent* (2014) and *Maleficent: Mistress of Evil* (2019) allow Maleficent's physical difference and social exclusion to be viewed as disabling rather than villainous.

One of the first scholarly texts to address disability in Disney studies was the seminal edited collection *Diversity in Disney Films: Critical Essays on Race, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality and Disability* (Cheu, 2013). This is one of the most noteworthy books in Disney studies as it attends to various representations across a broad array of animated films. The

scholars draw on various perspectives, emphasising social justice, to critically analyse race and ethnicity in *Peter Pan*, *The Princess and the Frog* and *The Aristocats*, and gender and sexuality in *Mulan*, *The Lion King* and the Disney villains. The most notable chapters that are of interest for this research are the three chapters on disability. This includes Norden's (2013) chapter on identity and otherness in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Schwartz, Lutfiya and Hansen's (2013) chapter on stereotypical portrayals of intellectual disability in Disney's classic animated films and Berberi and Berberi's (2013) chapter on being human in *Beauty and the Beast*. Through the lens of disability studies, all three chapters explore the portrayal of disability in Disney films and reveal the range of stereotypes utilised in these films to depict disabled characters.

Before this, however, research had been conducted looking at the prevalence of mental illness in Disney animated films (Lawson & Fouts, 2004). However, this was from a psychiatric perspective rather than a disability studies one. Nevertheless, the findings show that 85% of the 40 animated films that were analysed contained verbal references to mental illness. Lawson and Fouts (2004) argue that this shows how children are exposed to characters referred to or labelled as mentally ill, which has implications as they learn negative stereotypes and language towards mental health conditions. At the same time, two studies were conducted focusing on animated others (Lacroix, 2004) and images of gender, race, age and sexual orientation (Towbin et al., 2004), yet there was no focus or mention of disability in these studies.

Sammond (2011) discusses the depiction of Dumbo in relation to his large ears as a physical difference stating the film depicts Dumbo's difference which is read as a disability, as the main part of the plot. Further, Sammond (2011) claims that other characters 'see him *in* his difference, rather than *in spite of* his difference' (p. 59) and concludes

that '*Dumbo* becomes a warning to children who are popular against marginalizing those who are less so and to social leaders (and parents) to valorize and celebrate difference in all children' (p. 160). This is interesting because the scholar is not from a disability studies background and does not refer to any models of disability or theories from disability studies. Nevertheless, they were able to identify that *Dumbo's* large ears make him different and subsequently make the connection to disability as a result of social treatment. Further, Berube (2016) also includes *Dumbo* on the first page of his book *The Secret Life of Stories: From Don Quixote to Harry Potter, How Understanding Intellectual Disability Transforms the Way We Read*, where he discusses the prevalence of disability representations, claiming they are more ubiquitous than we realise. He argues, 'everyone knows *Dumbo* as the plucky little elephant who can fly; few people think of *Dumbo* as a child with a disability, even though his ridiculously large ears are, for most of the film, a source of stigma and shame' (Berube, 2016, p. 1).

Furthermore, I analysed the representation of *Dumbo* in the animated film and live-action retelling in a chapter titled "*Don't Just Fly, Soar*" *Reading Disability in Disney's Animation *Dumbo* (1941) and Live-Action Remake *Dumbo* (2019)* (Gibson, 2022) in the edited collection *Animals in Narrative Film and Television: Strange and Familiar Creatures* (Beeler and Beeler, 2022). Through the social and affirmation models of disability, I demonstrate that *Dumbo's* journey of self-discovery and acceptance provides a story of difference and inclusion. And I argue that *Dumbo* can potentially 'teach the audience to feel better about themselves regardless of negative societal attitudes' (p. 67) when read this way. Because although viewers will not have the magical ability to fly like *Dumbo*, viewers 'may be inspired to overcome social stigma and affirm divergence from normalcy,' whatever form that divergence may

take' (p. 67). These three texts on *Dumbo* demonstrate the importance of critically reading a film such as *Dumbo* and illustrates the potential a disability studies perspective can uncover in relation to difference, disability and acceptance.

Following this, Resene (2017) provided an in-depth analysis of the representation of disability in Disney's *Frozen*. In her article *From Evil Queen to Disabled Teen: Frozen Introduces Disney's First Disabled Princess*, she argues that *Frozen* introduced 'the studio's first disabled princess' (Resene, 2017, sec. 1). Discussing how Elsa's disability is encoded as a magical power, Resene (2017) demonstrates, through disability theory, how Elsa's portrayal shows disability as a universal experience. Furthermore, she states, 'the representation of disability as the PWD [person with a disability] experiences it is both refreshing and empowering' (Resene, 2017, sec. 3). Resene's analysis highlights the importance of critically analysing characters in Disney animated films through the lens of disability studies as it enables complex representations and stories to be uncovered and explored.

In the edited collection *Disney and Philosophy: Truth, Trust, and a Little Bit of Pixie Dust* (Davis, 2019), 27 chapters 'explore issues that affect each one of us: freedom, fatalism, friends, family, ethics, identity, disabilities, and ultimately death' (p.1). As such, it is clear that there continues to be a wide range of scholarship focusing on Disney. One chapter that is particularly valuable to my research in this book is the chapter titled *Accommodating Dory, but Disempowering Dopey? Dilemmas of Disability from Snow White to Finding Dory* (Mintz, 2019). In the chapter, Mintz (2019) coined the phrase *disempowered sidekicks* to describe a sidekick created from the perspective of the medical model. Using examples from Disney and Pixar animated films, Mintz argues that characters are often relegated to sidekick roles which 'reflects the need



for comic relief as a means of reconciling the fear society has toward nonverbal disability' (p. 67). This echoes Schwartz et al.'s (2013) chapter, which Mintz (2019) builds upon, providing strong evidence for the readings of disability representations in this way.

And finally, through thematic content analysis, Holcomb and Latham-Mintus (2022) analysed the representations of disability in the twenty most recent Disney and Pixar animated films. Focusing on disability stereotypes, they found that disability is overwhelmingly portrayed in a traditional way where disability is used for pity and humour or to show that the character was evil or old. They claim that 'disability representations continue to perpetuate and reaffirm the stigmatization of disability' (Holcomb & Latham-Mintus, 2022, p. 1). Out of the sample of Disney animated films, Holcomb and Latham-Mintus (2022) included *Bolt* (2008), *The Princess and the Frog* (2010), *Winnie the Pooh* (2011), *Wreck-it Ralph* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), *Big Hero 6*, *Zootopia* (2016) and *Moana* (2016). Their findings show that characters were portrayed as pitiable and supercrips in five of the films, a marker of evil in six films, and an object of ridicule in four. The only film with representations coded as ordinary or a positive difference was *Winnie the Pooh*. This shows very few progressive representations of disability in Disney animated films. In addition, it shows that many recent films contain updated stereotypes that are frequent in older films, demonstrating little progress made.

The previous studies I have discussed that analyse representations of disability in Disney animated films highlight the prevalence of disabled characters in Disney. In particular, it demonstrates the overwhelmingly negative and stereotypical portrayals that continue to be reinforced. Therefore, I believe it is important to look at all Disney animated films from 1937 to 2016 to analyse the frequency of impairment and disability and how it is portrayed.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This literature review has provided a history of disability studies to highlight the developments made, predominantly in the United Kingdom and the United States. The conceptualisation of the social model is one of the most significant developments where disability can be contextualised and understood as a social justice issue rather than simply a problem to be fixed as illustrated in the individual and medical models of disability. The criticisms of the social model have also been discussed as well as the development of the affirmation model of disability, critical disability studies and cultural disability studies following the critiques as scholars recognised that disability was constructed socially and culturally. From this, several theories including narrative prosthesis and the concept of normalcy were developed in order to better explain the problems of disability representation in literature and media. By applying these theories to film analysis, scholars have highlighted a wide range of stereotypes of disability that continue to be relied upon in mainstream media. The review of the field of disability studies and the key theories relating to representation of disability in film illustrate that there is a wide range of scholarship on disability which provides rich analysis. The literature in disability studies also demonstrates that there is still a need for critical analysis because of the stereotypes that continue to be used. Furthermore, there was little discussion on Disney from a disability studies perspective.

In addition to disability studies, I have discussed the field of Disney studies by exploring key scholarship that addresses the importance of studying and critically analysing Disney because of its global dominance. The review of scholarship on representation in Disney animated films shows that there is a lack of attention given to disability in comparison to other protected characteristics. There was only a small sample of studies

that have analysed disability in Disney animated films which shows that there is a gap in Disney studies which attends to the representation of disability.

By conducting this literature review, I have aimed to demonstrate the development of both fields and the gaps that are present. By carrying out this study on the representation of disability in Disney animated films, it is my intention to contribute to both the field of disability studies and Disney studies. It is clear from this review that there is a critical need to analyse the representation of impairment and disability in Disney animated films from the perspective of disability studies in both fields.

### **3. Chapter Three – Methodology: A Critical Analysis of the Representation of Impairment and Disability in Disney Animated Films (1937 – 2016)**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I outline the methodological approach and research methods used to analyse the representation of impairment and disability in Disney animated films. I adopted a qualitative approach to identify the frequency of impairment and disability, and to explore how disability is represented from a disability studies perspective. This project was conducted in two phases; firstly, a content analysis of all Disney animated films (1937 – 2016), followed by in-depth film analysis of select films that emerged from the content analysis according to key themes. Firstly, in this chapter, I discuss the main aim and rationale, followed by the research questions for this study. Next, I discuss the research methods and procedure for data collection and analysis, including the sample and justification for the chosen approaches in relation to existing research and methodological literature. I also clarify my own identity concerning the research. Finally, by discussing my research position, I explain the importance of a reflexive and interpretive approach that qualitative research enables and the positive impact it can have. This is particularly beneficial in disability studies research, allowing the researcher to uncover disability narratives that often go unnoticed and unexplored (Berger, 2016; Haller, 2010).

Qualitative research relies predominantly on non-numerical data by carrying out rich interpretations of the world, the human experience and social phenomena through various techniques such as interviews, observations and textual analysis (Silverman, 2021). Therefore, researchers conducting qualitative research often adopt an interpretive

paradigm which views social reality not as fixed or singular but shaped by social contexts, allowing subjective interpretations to occur (Bhattacharya, 2008; Pelz, n.d.). This contrasts with quantitative research which focuses primarily on numerical data and uses a positivist research paradigm. Quantitative research assumes that a single reality exists and follows standardised procedures to understand, identify and measure data (Bengtsson, 2016).

This research study conducts qualitative research as it is concerned with studying phenomena to understand the construction of disability. Although I collected descriptive data on the frequency of impairment and disability, I also conducted an interpretative analysis to uncover representations beyond the surface level. Therefore, in this research, I carried out a summative content analysis on 56 Disney animated films followed by in-depth film analysis on selected films relating to the patterns and themes identified in the content analysis findings relating to the construction of disability.

### **3.2 Research Aim and Rationale**

The first stage of this study was to identify characters with impairments and disability in Disney animated films in order to analyse how disability is portrayed. As discussed in the previous two chapters, the distinction is made between impairment and disability to show how disability is imposed on top of and in response to people's impairments. This is the theoretical underpinning for this research and my position as a researcher, which views disability as a social and cultural construct.

### **3.3 Research Questions**

- 1) How many characters have an impairment and/or disability in Disney animated films from 1937 to 2016?

- 2) In what ways are impairment and/or disability represented in Disney animated films?
- 3) Have these representations changed over time?
  - a. If so, how?

### **3.4 Research Position**

In disability studies, scholars have stated the importance of emancipatory research to ensure that research about disability includes the perspective or voices of disabled people (Barnes, 2014). It is a research perspective described by Noel (2016) as, 'producing knowledge that can be of benefit to disadvantaged people' and 'an umbrella term that can include many streams of critical theory-based research such as feminist, disability, race and gender theory' (p. 455). Emancipatory research in disability studies therefore adopts the social model of disability to work towards removing barriers, improving equality, and empowering disabled people. As a research paradigm, emancipatory research produces knowledge that can benefit disadvantaged people (Noel, 2016).

Disability studies research is grounded by the phrase *nothing about us, without us* (Charlton, 1998), emphasising the importance of including disabled people and perspectives in all aspects of research. Priestly (1997) developed six core questions that can be asked when conducting research in disability studies:

- Is the research based on a social model of disability?
- Will the researcher recognise and engage the social model to challenge oppression?
- Will the research contribute to removing disabling barriers and the self-empowerment of disabled people?

- Will the research be accountable to disabled people and their organisations involved?
- Will the researcher ensure that voice is given to the individual and shared experiences of disabled people?
- Will participants be involved in all parts of the research, including the choice of research methods? (Cameron, 2014; Noel, 2016)

From this, an interpretive approach is adopted, which 'aspires to achieve an empathic understanding and representation of the subjective perceptions and everyday lived experiences of the [disabled] people being studied' (Noel, 2016, p. 5). In addition, this allows personal points of view and feelings from the researcher to be included throughout the research process (Bhattacharya, 2008; Dodgson, 2019). Qualitative approaches in disability studies, then, aim to:

'Give voice' to those who have been marginalized by society, making their experiences more visible and accessible to mainstream groups and helping to facilitate the incorporation of social differences as valued elements of a civil moral community devoted to social justice. (Berger & Lorenz, 2016, p. 6)

For this research study, I did not include research participants as I strictly analysed films. However, I still aimed to achieve emancipatory research as the social model of disability underpins my research. In addition, by critically examining representations in Disney animated films to uncover the underlying messages of disability, I believe this contributes to disability studies research by challenging oppression in cultural texts.

I identify as a reflexive researcher as I understand how my background and experiences have influenced the findings. As Mitchell et al. (2017) assert, 'critically oriented reflexivity has become a tool for

scholars to identify the threads of their complicity' (p. 78). However, whilst doing so, I also locate 'narratives in the wider socio-cultural context, and explore narratives principally, though not exclusively, for what they tell us about disablism and other sources of oppression' (Thomas, 1999, p. 151). In addition, I adopt a pro-disability perspective to interpret the films, which has developed from my background in relation to impairment and disability as well as my experience in disability studies (Berger, 2016).

### **3.5 Content Analysis**

Content analysis is a research method used to analyse written, verbal and visual communication and outputs, and has the potential to reveal valuable information about phenomena (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). In doing so, content analysis enables the researcher to describe the characteristics of a text or document and detect themes, trends and patterns (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). A content analysis aims to gather a concise and comprehensive description of the phenomena being analysed. It is a flexible method which can be used quantitatively or qualitatively (Drisko & Maschi, 2016; Scheufele, 2008). One of the key differences is that quantitative content analysis focuses predominantly on manifest content, where the researcher conducts a surface-level analysis describing what is present and easily observable (Neuendorf, 2011; Riffe et al., 2019). This often involves statistical analysis to determine the reliability of the findings (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). Qualitative content analysis, on the other hand, is defined as 'A research method for the subjective interpretive of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).



In 1952, content analysis was described by Berelson (1952) as 'A research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication' (p. 18). However, this has been critiqued for not including qualitative and latent perspectives. And thus, content analysis has developed over the decades, making it an applicable research method for both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Indeed, Downe-Wambolt (2009) emphasises that content analysis is more than a counting process and states it is 'A research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena' (p. 314). This was further underlined by Krippendorff (2013), who defined content analysis as 'A research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts to the contexts of their use' (p. 18). Furthermore, Vaismoradi et al. (2013) claim that 'By using content analysis, it is possible to analyse data qualitatively and at the same time quantify the data' (p. 400). They explain that 'Content analysis uses a descriptive approach in coding the data and its interpretation of quantitative counts of codes' (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 400).

In Disney studies, content analysis is a common research method to analyse representation in Disney animated films. As discussed in more detail in the literature review chapter, there has been much scholarly focus on the representation of gender (Arnold et al., 2015; England et al., 2011; Hoerrner, 1996; Wiersma, 2000); age (Atkinson, 2017; Robinson et al., 2007; Zurcher & Robinson, 2018); race and ethnicity (Lacroix, 2004); family relationships including caregiving and parenting (Holcomb et al., 2015); parental roles (Zurcher et al., 2019); couples and families (Tanner et al., 2003) and families across generations (Zurcher et al., 2018). In addition, there has been an analysis of the representations of

death and coping mechanisms for the bereaved (Graham et al., 2018) and pro-social behaviour (Padilla-Walker et al., 2013) which all utilised content analysis as the research method. This indicates how valuable content analysis as a research method can be when analysing a specific representation in a text. However, many of these studies utilised a quantitative content analysis where statistical analysis is conducted to determine intercoder reliability. In addition, the coding process in quantitative content analysis analyses only manifest content. This means there is little to no interpretation of the content conducted. For specific representations, this is suitable as the interpretation of social construction is not necessary, such as for examples of death, animals or impairment. However, since my study analysed the representation of disability which involves looking at impairment and interpreting disability as a social construct, analysis beyond the surface level is required. Therefore, qualitative content analysis was most suitable.

Qualitative content analysis has been a valuable research method utilised in disability studies to 'reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions about disability that underlie an audience's interpretation of the material' (Berger, 2016, p. 177). In his chapter *Disability and Humour in Film and Television: A Content Analysis* - which was discussed in the literature review - Berger (2016) reveals how conducting a content analysis allowed his analysis to be informed by his experience in disability studies to interpret the texts from a 'pro-disability perspective' (p. 185). By identifying and analysing texts such as *Tropic Thunder*, *Dumb and Dumber* and *Family Guy* for the ways in which disability humour is represented, Berger (2016) shows how representations are used to 'reflect and influence specific themes and meanings' (p. 186) of disability. This example of content analysis utilised in disability research indicates how the research method allows researchers to analyse texts and

interpret the cultural meanings of disability by investigating how representations are created in media texts. The use of content analysis in disability studies is also emphasised by disability studies scholar Haller (2010) who claims that an analysis of disability in media content can highlight the cultural views of disability and uncover the conscious and unconscious perceptions that society holds about people with impairments. Therefore, by conducting a content analysis on a phenomena like Disney, this study aimed to identify the depictions of impairment and disability found in Disney animated feature films and the various ways in which disability is portrayed.

Qualitative content analysis allows the researcher to analyse latent content by 'interpreting what is hidden deep within the text' (Kleinheksel et al., 2020, p. 129). A latent content analysis acknowledges the involvement of the researcher in the analysis process and allows the researcher to use their background, personal experience, theories and lenses to interpret and understand meanings in the data (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). This goes beyond quantitative content analysis, focusing only on manifest content and identifying what is on the surface. However, qualitative approaches can also be applied to manifest content analysis. As Kleinheksel et al. (2020) explain, 'the purpose of qualitative manifest content analysis is to transcend simple word counts and delve into a deeper examination of the language in order to organize large amounts of text into categories that reflect a shared meaning' (p. 128).

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) note three approaches to qualitative content analysis: conventional, directed and summative. Although all three approaches can be utilised to interpret meaning from the context of the texts, they have several differences in their application. Firstly, in *conventional content analysis*, no preconceived categories are

used to code the content. Instead, coding categories are generated directly from the text data. Secondly, *directed content analysis* is more structured and starts with a theory or research findings from the literature, which guides initial codes. Finally, the third approach is *summative content analysis*, which begins by identifying or quantifying the text content to understand its contextual use by interpreting the underlying context. In this way, a summative content analysis goes beyond manifest content to include latent content allowing the researcher to conduct an interpretation of the content. In summative content analysis, data analysis begins by searching and identifying occurrences of the recognised word or symbol in the text. If the analysis were to stop at this point, it would be referred to as manifest content analysis. It would also be quantitative as it focuses on counting the frequency of content. However, this is only the first phase as the analysis continues by going beyond the surface level by including latent content. This allows the researcher to identify manifest and latent content, but the focus is predominantly on 'discovering underlying meaning of the words or content' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1284).

For this study, a summative content analysis approach was used to identify the frequency of impairment and disability and interpret the meaning of specific representations. This is identified by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) as they explain that when conducting a summative content analysis, 'the text should be approached in relation to particular content' because 'an analysis of the patterns leads to an interpretation of the contextual meaning of specific terms or content' (p. 1286). This approach is helpful for this study because it allows the frequency of impairment and disability to be analysed in addition to the contextual meaning of the representation of disability. As Brennen (2017) suggests,

as films consist of elements from a socially constructed reality, these need to be understood by analysing the meanings within the text.

### 3.6 Codebook

As discussed in the previous section, a summative content analysis was chosen as the research method for the first part of this project to analyse how impairment and disability are portrayed in Disney animated films. A codebook was developed to collect data and categorise the characters. This included their demographics and information about how disability was constructed and portrayed within the films. The codebook, which can be found in Table 3 below, consists of several categories, including the film's year, the decade of release, and whether the film was an adaptation of an existing narrative or an original story. For each character with an impairment or disability, their demographics were coded, which included whether they were human or anthropomorphic, their role, narrative role, age, gender, race/ethnicity, class and impairment. Further codes were used to gather information about the construct of disability, including whether the impairment was age-related, weight-related or a superpower; if the impairment was temporary or long-term; what the function of the impairment and disability was and whether the impairment or disability it was implied or labelled in the narrative. Every character with an impairment or disability was coded using the coding book, where as much information was gathered about their impairment and the context in which they became disabled, if applicable.

*Table 3 - Codebook*

<b>Film</b>
<b>Film Title:</b> Full title of film when released

**Release Date:** The date when the film was released (box office)

**Original Film or Adaptation:**

1. Original film
2. Adaptation

**Character Demographic - For characters coded with an impairment**

**Character ID:** e.g. 1, 2, 3, 4

**Character Name:** Name of character given in the film (if available)

**Character Description:** Short description of appearance and clothes and demeanour

**Human or Anthropomorphic**

1. Human
2. Anthropomorphic

**Role:** Within the film's narrative, what role does the character play

1. Primary – Main characters throughout the film and narrative
2. Secondary – Recurring character who are less important
3. Tertiary – Character who appears in 1 or 2 scenes but has limited purpose

**Narrative Role**

1. The Hero – Character on a quest to solve something
2. The Villain – Character who tries to stop the hero from succeeding
3. The Donor – Character who provides the hero with a special power, tool etc.
4. The Dispatcher – Character who sends the hero on their quest
5. The False Hero – Character appears to help but is actually a fraud
6. The Helper – Character helps the hero on their quest
7. The Princess/Victim – Character who is the 'prize' for the hero, in need of 'saving', often rescued by the hero
8. The Father – Character guards the princess and rewards the hero
9. N/A

**Age**

1. Baby
2. Child
3. Teen
4. Adult
5. Elderly
6. Unspecified

**Gender**

1. Female
2. Male
3. Other

**Race**

1. White (Europe, Middle East, or North Africa)
2. Black/African American
3. American Indian or Alaska Native (North and South America)
4. Asian
5. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
6. Mixed
7. Other

**Class**

1. Royal
2. Upper
3. Middle
4. Working
5. Low
6. N/A

**Impairment**

1. **Visual Impairment**  
(Blind, one eye, guide dog, cane)
2. **Hearing Impairment**  
(Hearing loss, hearing aid, deafness)
3. **Speech Impairment**  
(Mute/non-verbal, lisp, stammer, aphasia, apraxia of speech)
4. **Mobility Impairment**  
(Wheelchair, mobility scooter, walking stick/frame, crutches, amputee, limp)



5. **Cognitive Impairment**

(Someone finds it hard remembering, learning new things, concentrating and decision-making – traits associated with autism, dyslexia and memory loss)

6. **Physical Impairment**

(Scar, posture, gait abnormality, skin disorder, facial disfigurement, restricted growth, gigantism, underdeveloped body part, overdeveloped body part)

7. **Mental Impairment**

(Traits associated with mood disorders, anxiety and panic attacks, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, depression, hearing voices, mania, loneliness, obsessive-compulsive disorder, paranoia, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia)

8. **Neurological Impairment**

(Nervous system – seizures, stroke, Asperger's syndrome, narcolepsy, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, motor neurone disease, Parkinson's disease, dementia, multiple sclerosis)

9. **Illness/Disease**

**Is the impairment age related?**

1. Yes
2. No

**Does the impairment qualify or get implied as a superpower?**

1. Yes
2. No

### **Temporary or Long-Term**

1. Temporary (impairment that could be fixed e.g. broken leg)
2. Long-term

### **Function of Impairment**

1. Description (characteristic, describes the character)
2. Punishment (character does something bad which results in them getting an impairment)
3. Humour (characters impairment is used for comedic value)
4. Disguise
5. Symbol of evil
6. Magical power/ability

### **Implied or Labelled**

1. Implied in the narrative
2. Implied by other characters
3. Self-identify
4. Hidden
5. Labelled by the narrative
6. Labelled by other characters
7. Acquired
8. Changing

The codebook was created after reviewing previous studies before the data collection occurred and continued to be updated throughout the data collection and analysis process. As Benaquisto (2008) asserts, whether the researcher is aiming 'to provide descriptive accounts, searching for

patterns, or intending to develop theory, the goals of code creation are to identify categories and themes by making their criteria explicit and providing evidence for them – and the conclusions based on them – that is drawn from the data’ (p. 2). Before creating my codebook, I reviewed previous studies that used content analysis to analyse Disney animated films (Graham et al., 2018; Wiersma, 2000; Zurcher et al., 2019; Zurcher & Robinson, 2018). This was in addition to other types of media, including portrayals of sexuality in television (Raley & Lucas, 2006) and portrayal of gender in Pixar animated films (Decker, 2010). Several studies focusing on aspects of disability that used content analysis methodology were also reviewed. This included the analysis of physical disability in children’s television (Bond, 2013), mental illness in Disney animated films (Lawson & Fouts, 2004) and disability representation in Disney and Pixar animated films (Holcomb & Latham-Mintus, 2022).

Additionally, several students’ monographs and dissertations were reviewed, particularly those that looked at specific representations of protected characteristics in Disney films, including gender (Wiersma, 2000) and disability (Doberstein, 2019). For example, Doberstein (2019) compared the representations of disability in nineteenth-century fairy tales to their Disney adaptations in her master’s dissertation. She used qualitative and quantitative content analysis methodology to compare the original fairy tales with their Disney animated adaptations. Several of the codes that featured in Doberstein’s (2019) study were utilised and developed for this study, specifically the *function of impairment* code and the *implied or labelled* code. This was because, out of all of the previous studies I reviewed, Doberstein’s (2019) research was most aligned with my research study. Furthermore, the study was from a critical disability studies background and therefore adopted a similar research position, viewing disability as a social and cultural construct. In addition, it is one

of the few studies I have found that analysed disability representation in Disney films through content analysis.

The codebook was updated and edited throughout the research process. It is common to conduct the data collection alongside the analysis in qualitative content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Moreover, in summative content analysis, the codes are developed from researchers' interests and literature review, identified and developed before and during the analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Therefore, I could change and develop the codes based on what emerged from the data or relevant literature discovered throughout this process (Doberstein, 2019; Scheufele, 2008; Silverman, 2021; Wiersma, 2000). This is one of the key benefits of qualitative content analysis, as the coding frame can evolve throughout the coding and analysis phases of the research. Thus, the codes are 'subject to change and refinement as the researcher proceeds with successive passes through the data' (Benaquisto, 2008, p. 2).

### **3.7 Coding Categories**

Following a summative content analysis method, I created the codes before and during the data collection and analysis process. The codes were derived from my knowledge and experiences in disability studies and findings from other literature and similar studies. In the next section, I will describe in more detail the code categories used in the final version of the codebook. In doing so, I will explain their purpose for analysing the portrayal of impairment and disability in Disney animated films.

#### **3.7.1 Film Information**

Firstly, I gathered information about each film (n = 56), including its title, release date (year and decade) and whether it was an original film or an

adaptation. Then, when I viewed the films, I watched them chronologically to analyse the differences between the decades, starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and ending with *Moana* (2016). It was essential to code the film's release date so that comparisons could be made between films from different decades. In addition, the *original film or adaptation* code helped identify whether the film was an original story from Disney or an adaptation of a previous text, such as a fairy tale or literary novel. As Disney is synonymous with fairy tale adaptations and their Disneyfication of literary texts, it was helpful to compare the difference between films that were original films or adaptations. These are discussed in more detail in chapter 5, 6 and 7 where I conduct film analysis on select films and also discuss the literary texts that the films are based on to discuss how the representation of disability changes through the Disneyfication of the text.

### **3.7.2 Human or Anthropomorphic**

When analysing the Disney animated films, it was important to distinguish whether a character was human or anthropomorphic. Anthropomorphic refers to the human traits and characteristics given to a non-human object or animal (Eddy et al., 1993). Anthropomorphism is a common narrative technique utilised in Disney animated films and has been identified in the Classic Disney Model (Wasko, 2020). It has been a popular technique since the start of animation, and Disney was one of the first to give animated characters such as the Three Little Pigs and Mickey Mouse human characteristics (Hamilton, 1983). Scholarship on anthropomorphism in animated films shows audiences' visual pleasure when seeing human traits in an animated object, allowing them to relate to these characters more (Holliday, 2016). As such, the animated figure, rather than being static and one-dimensional, has emotions, characteristics and behaviours, which increases the relationship between

the audience and the characters on screen. In Disney's case, it captures the audience's nostalgia, fantasy and innocence (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). In relation to disability, anthropomorphism is important to identify because several characters, such as 'disempowered sidekicks' (Mintz, 2019), are given characteristics that can reinforce common stereotypes of disability (Schwartz et al., 2013). I created this code as I believed it was important to make the distinction between human and anthropomorphic to recognise any patterns between these two categories and the way in which impairment and disability are represented.

### **3.7.3 Character Role**

A character's role was coded to categorise their role in the films in relevance to impact on the narrative. The categories in this code were *primary, secondary and tertiary*. Characters were coded as primary if they were a main character, appeared in most scenes, and the storyline followed them throughout the film. This includes heroes and villains who play a crucial role in the narrative arc, such as Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* and Elsa in *Frozen*. A secondary character was identified as a character who appeared often, but the plotline did not revolve around them. These characters in Disney animated films are often sidekicks or helpers that still play a part in the storyline but are secondary to the main character, such as Le Fou from *Beauty and the Beast* and Mr Smee in *Peter Pan*. Finally, a tertiary character is a character that does not feature in the film frequently and does not have any significant impact on the plot. Tertiary characters are also known as minor or background characters. They appear in only one or several small scenes that support the narrative rather than moving it forward with their narrative arcs. In Disney animated films, tertiary characters include Chief Bogo from *Zootopia* and Grandmama from *The Princess and the Frog*. I chose to use this code because I believe it was important to show the role the character's played

in the film and whether there was a pattern in the role assigned to characters with impairments. For example, whether there were predominantly only secondary characters with impairments or if there was an equal proportion across primary, secondary and tertiary roles.

### **3.7.4 Narrative Role**

This code refers to the role that the character has in the narrative. I developed this code from Propp's character types. In *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (Propp, 1968), Propp analysed the structure of 100 traditional Russian folk tales and developed 31 functions and seven character types found repeatedly in the tales. The seven characters are *the villain, the donor, the helper, the princess, the dispatcher, the hero* and *the false hero*. These archetypes were used as code categories because many of Disney's animated films are fairy tale adaptations which follow the same narrative structure and employ the same archetypal characters (Wasko, 2020; Zipes, 1995, 2011). Further, Disney animated films that are not fairy tale adaptations also follow a similar narrative structure employing archetypes utilised in the Classic Disney Model. In addition, I added a code 'N/A' for characters who could not be categorised into one of the seven character types. When characters could not be coded, it was often because they were tertiary characters and therefore did not play a substantial role in the narrative. In the literature, Brusentsev et al. (2012) investigated Propp's functions and character types in video games. They found that Propp's model was useful when analysing video game narratives and could help video game designers when facing creative challenges. Furthermore, they demonstrate the suitability of Propp's character types as an analytical tool for various stories across different platforms and media types. This category will provide insight into the role the character plays in the narrative which will potentially reveal if there is

a reliance upon disability associated with a specific narrative role such as hero or villain.

### **3.7.5 Character Demographics**

Several codes were created to gather information about the character's demographics. This included age, gender, race/ethnicity and class. These demographics were compared with impairment type and function to look for patterns and themes. The first code refers to the character's age, with several categories: *baby, child, teen, adult, elderly* and *N/A*. Characters for this were coded by their appearance and if there were any references made to their age. For example, many elderly characters were identifiable by their appearance, such as grey hair or mobility devices like a walking stick. Where characters could not be identified by their appearance, for example, anthropomorphic objects and animals, they were categorised as *N/A*. However, most characters could be categorised as their appearance or dialogue provided enough evidence. For instance, many of the Disney Princesses are teenagers (Wasko, 2020); however, the villains are often either adults or elderly. In the literature, Robinson et al. (2007) found that 71% of the 34 Disney animated films (1937 – 2004) analysed contained at least one negative portrayal of older characters. This was also supported by Towbin et al. (2004), who found that older characters were portrayed in stereotypical ways; however, several older characters were also portrayed positively.

For gender, there were three categories: *female, male* and *other*. All characters were assigned a gender (female or male) as all characters had explicit characteristics which could be assigned to either gender role. This code was created to detect patterns between gender and other codes, including impairment type and narrative role. There has been much scholarly focus on gender in Disney animated films with a critique of



feminism in the Disney princesses (Davis, 2005; Kailash & Reed, 2018; Muir, 2022); gender politics in Disney villains (Li-Vollmer & LaPointe, 2003; Putnam, 2013; Sharmin & Sattar, 2018); gender roles (England et al., 2011; Hoerrner, 1996) and masculinity with the male heroes (Davis, 2014; Macaluso, 2018). For example, although there are examples where gender messages are becoming more progressive (Davis, 2006b; Hoerrner, 1996; Mollet, 2020; Wasko, 2020), scholars argue that gender role stereotypes continue to be portrayed (Arnold et al., 2015; Streiff & Dundes, 2017; Towbin et al., 2004). However, as the literature identifies progress in newer films, it was helpful to code the gender of characters to see if any patterns emerged based on a character's gender and impairment type as well as how disability is constructed between genders.

For race and ethnicity, several code categories were created before the data collection and modified throughout the coding process. The categories were *white*, *black/African American*, *Asian*, *Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander*, *mixed* and *Hispanic*. These categories were developed after referring to previous studies that coded race/ethnicity in Disney animated films (Faherty, 2001; Towbin et al., 2004) and the US Census (Bureau, n.d.). Previous research has found that newer films are becoming diverse in their representations of race and ethnicity (Wasko, 2020), with the first princess of colour, Tiana, in *The Princess and the Frog* (2009); however, many negative stereotypes still exist (Brode, 2005; Lugo-Lugo & Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2009). Several of these stereotypes have forced Disney to provide content warnings before the films on Disney Plus to warn the audience that the films contain outdated cultural depictions (BBC News, 2020). Therefore, it was necessary to code characters for their race/ethnicity to identify any patterns between these categories compared to the impairment type or function.

Class was the final code created to gather information on the character's demographics. The categories for this code were developed throughout the coding process, and the final codes were *royal, upper, middle, working, low* and *N/A*. Along with disability, class is a protected characteristic that has not received as much scholarly attention in Disney studies. However, I believe it was useful to categorise the character's class level to see if any patterns emerged between class and impairment type or function.

### **3.7.6 Impairment**

To analyse representations of disability, I created a code to identify a character's impairment. These categories were: *visual, hearing, speech, mobility, cognitive, physical, mental, neurological* and *illness/disease*. I tried to use these categories as broad terms to describe a character's difference rather than labelling and diagnosing them with a medical condition. This code is used to identify manifest and latent content. The manifest content appears on the surface level, which the audience can quickly identify, for example, a character in a wheelchair or a character with a hook for their missing hand. This was important to find out the frequency of impairment in Disney animated films; however, if I were to stop my analysis there, it would only focus on impairment, which could be argued as being rooted in the medical model of disability. Therefore, I also analyse latent content where I interpret specific depictions, which moves my analysis beyond a simple count of impairment to explore representations of disability as a social construct imposed on top of people's impairment. My understanding of disability is broader than strict medical conditions and includes bodily differences. Therefore, I used the impairment categories to provide a classification system, particularly when identifying manifest content. Many of the broader representations of disability were still categorised as an impairment but as a way of

associating them to a broad impairment type to show how society disables them.

### **3.7.7 Age-Related**

A code was created to determine whether a character's impairment was age-related. The categories were *yes* or *no*. This code provided additional context to a character's impairment. If a character's impairment was age-related, it was likely that they were an elderly character, and their impairment was coded because of this. Therefore, this code provided information to show that the characters coded with physical or mobility impairments were elderly and likely to have age-related impairments. These depictions are important as elderly age and its related impairments are an ordinary part of life and, therefore, should arguably be represented in this way in Disney animated films.

### **3.7.8 Magical Power and Ability**

A code was also created to determine whether a character's disability was depicted or encoded as a magical power. This code was created during the coding process after watching the films where several characters had a magical power or ability. However, the way in which they were treated, isolated or bullied created a disability narrative when read through the social model. This code provided extra context by stating if the character had a magical power or ability, which was helpful when discussing the findings and conducting further film analysis.

### **3.7.9 Temporary or Long-Term**

This code was created to identify whether a character's impairment or disability was temporary or long-term. A character's actual impairment or disability was assessed within the film's narrative to see whether it

existed as a long-term impairment or disability or if it occurred temporarily. This was an important distinction because temporary impairments are commonly used in narratives as something to be fixed or overcome (Linton, 1998; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). Temporary impairments are frequently assigned to characters such as heroes so they can overcome them within the film's narrative arc (Davis, 2013). In contrast, long-term impairments are often ascribed to characters such as sidekicks and villains where impairment and disability exist as part of their characterisation but are also exploited for purpose and meaning or, in some instances, they are part of their identity.

### **3.7.10 Function of Impairment and Disability**

The function of impairment code was created to assess the purpose and reason for a character's impairment or disability in the film. This code contained six categories: *description*, *punishment*, *humour*, *disguise*, *a symbol of evil* and *magical power*. These were created before and during the coding process after reviewing the literature on representations of disability in literature and film. In particular, this code was developed from Doberstein's (2019) study. However, I modified the categories to suit this study. The description category was assigned to a character when they had an impairment which did not constitute any further meaning or function. For example, an elderly character who had a walking stick or a character with glasses where impairment was not used as part of the plot to contribute to the construction of disability. Punishment was assigned to a character when they acquired an impairment from their wrongdoing. Humour was assigned to a category when a character's impairment was used for comedic value. The disguise category was assigned to characters when a character uses aspects of impairment to disguise themselves as an elderly or impaired person to trick another character. The symbol of evil category was assigned to characters when

their impairment was used as part of their characterisation and contributed to their evilness. And finally, the magical power or ability category was assigned to characters with magical powers or abilities where they are treated in a specific disabling way. This code turned out to be a very important aspect of the film analysis because it provides the context of how characters with impairments become disabled.

### **3.7.11 Implied or Labelled**

The final code was developed to gather information about the representation of impairment and disability and how they are used within the film's narrative. This code had eight categories: *implied in the narrative, implied by other characters, self-identify, hidden, labelled by the narrative, labelled by other characters, acquired* and *changing*. This was adopted and developed from Doberstein's (2019) study as it was helpful to identify whether the disability status of characters was implied or labelled. This code relied on my interpretation of how the characters were portrayed in the narrative. First, characters were assigned to the 'implied in the narrative' category when their impairment or disability was explicit, obvious or stated within the narrative. The next category, 'implied by other characters,' was similar but assigned to a character if another character had implied or stated their impairment or disability. The following two categories, 'labelled by the narrative' and 'labelled by other characters,' were used when the disabled label was placed on top of a person with an impairment through the narrative of the film or when another character labels them explicitly. The next category was 'self-identify,' which was used when a character self-identifies their impairment or disability, followed by 'hidden' when a character's impairment or disability is hidden within the narrative or from others. Next, the 'acquired' category was used when a character acquires their impairment

or disability throughout the narrative. Finally, 'changing' was assigned when a character changes from non-disabled to disabled and back again.

### **3.8 Data Collection**

The data collection and coding took place over four months, from September to December 2020. This gave me a considerable window of time to watch all of the films for the first time and carry out additional viewings of the films that contained more complex depictions of impairment and disability. I watched one film a day, four times a week, to fully immerse myself in the films and gather as much information as needed. I watched the films chronologically, starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and all the way to *Moana* (2016). The data collection occurred during the COVID-19 global pandemic when the UK was in its second national lockdown. Fortunately, this did not impact my data collection, and I could continue working from home and carry out my data collection and analysis as planned.

### **3.9 Corpus**

All feature-length animated films from the Walt Disney Animation Studio were included for this study. The corpus comprised 56 films starting with the studio's first animated feature-length film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and ending with *Moana* (2016). All films were viewed once, and any characters with an impairment or disability were noted. The films that featured impairment or disability were viewed up to 4 times again, depending on the complexity of the representation. During this time, characters' demographics and information about the portrayal of disability relating to the narrative were coded using the code book and coding sheet developed for this study. All films were viewed on Disney's streaming platform Disney Plus, except *Make Mine Music* (1946), the only film not available on Disney Plus and accessed via Amazon Prime. Disney+ was

accessed through my own subscription, which I have had since its release in the United Kingdom in March 2020. Disney Plus provides subscribers with access to Disney's 'vault' where most films and television series from Walt Disney Animation Studio, Walt Disney Pictures, Marvel Studios, Lucasfilm, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Studios are available.

Of the 56 films, 36 featured at least one character with an impairment or disability. However, some of these films only included a character with an impairment that had no social implications (n = 14). The remaining 22 films were viewed up to 4 more times to conduct latent content analysis where interpretation could take place. As Hsieh and Shannon (2005) assert, the first step is to analyse the appearance of a particular type of content (impairment or disability), followed by the interpretation process to discover the underlying meanings of the content (construction of disability). Because disability as a social construct can be complex, particularly in animated films that are often set in fantasy worlds, several viewings were required to unpack the meanings associated with disability.

### **3.10 Film Analysis**

Following the content analysis, I conducted analysis on several films to explore in greater detail the way in which disability was represented. The films were chosen according to the themes and patterns that emerged from the content analysis data in relation to the occurrence of impairment and disability. Film analysis provides a rich and detailed interpretation of a film which moves beyond the latent content to interpret the meanings in film. It is a technique that enables a range of elements in a film to be analysed including semiotics, narrative structure, cultural context, and mise-en-scene (Mikos, 2014). The benefit of film analysis is that the

researcher is not limited to one of these but can analyse a wide range of elements for their intent and impact.

For film analysis, representation means 'the production of meaning through language' (Hall, 1997, p. 28) where signs are used to communicate meaning. Hall asserts that there are two systems of representations. Firstly the system of signs where articulation happens and secondly, the system of mental concepts which 'classify and organise the world into meaningful categories' (Hall, 1997, p. 28). Films are a system of signs which 'stand for objects in the so-called real world, but they also stand for abstract ideas and fantasy worlds' (Mikos, 2014, p. 414). And thus, by understanding films as a medium of communication, they are also open to interpretation which allows the audience to make different readings of a film depending on their background. This is also known as reception theory, developed by Stuart Hall. The theory establishes how media representations are encoded by the producer and decoded by the audience. The important aspect however is that the representations can be decoded in a variety of ways, beyond what the producer has encoded, depending on the audience's background and interpretation.

Hall (1993) poses three positions of decoding: the dominant hegemonic position, the negotiated position and the oppositional view. Firstly, the dominant position is where the viewer interprets the preferred meaning which has been encoded by the producer. Secondly, the negotiated position is when the viewer acknowledges or understands the preferred meaning or message that is being conveyed but also has oppositional views about it. For Pritchard (2021c), the negotiated position implicates the representation of disability because it is 'based on the belief that the message is decoded based on particular sociocultural beliefs held by the audience, which misinterprets the intention of the text'



(p. 51). And finally, the oppositional view is when the viewer uses their own experiences and beliefs to decode the messages which often results in the unintended messages within the text to be interpreted. Pritchard (2021c) uses reception theory along with disability studies theories to show how narratives in *Family Guy* can be read through the oppositional view providing the potential to challenge dominant stereotypes of disability. For the film analysis in this thesis, I will also use disability studies theories to highlight how Disney animated films have the potential to provide narratives on disability exemplifying the social model and affirmation models of disability.

Scholars in disability studies have highlighted the importance of film studies as a methodological technique when analysing disability imagery. Hoeksema and Smit (2001) claimed the need for the fusion of film studies and disability studies in order to explore cultural images of disability with a specific focus on a disability perspective. This was echoed by Wilde (2018) who notes that the film studies and disability studies allows scholars to revisit and develop theories and methodologies. In addition, she asserts how many analyses still focus on the depictions of impairment without recognising societal barriers and acknowledging the construction of disability, as viewed through the social and cultural models of disability. Therefore, film studies through the perspective of disability is imperative for disability studies scholars who are analysing films to uncover aspects of impairment *and* disability.

### **3.11 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have discussed the research methods utilised in this study to analyse the representation of impairment and disability in Disney animated films. Furthermore, I have described the rationale of this study and my research position to justify the importance of critically analysing

representations of disability in Disney animated films. To do this, I have explained the distinction between impairment and disability and its importance for identifying disability as a social construct. In addition, I have discussed the research methods chosen for this study, specifically a summative content analysis and film analysis, which attends to both manifest and latent content. I have also discussed, in detail, the codebook that was created and used for the content analysis to gather information about the films and characters which enabled me to critically analyse the representations of impairment and disability. In the next chapter, I describe the data that has been generated from this study's content analysis.

## **4. Chapter Four - Content Analysis Findings of the Representation of Impairment and Disability in Disney Animated Films (1937 – 2016)**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the findings from the content analysis carried out for this study. My definition of disability as a social and cultural construct provides a much broader reading of disability than the individual and medical views of disability. Through the lens of disability studies, I illustrate the wide range of portrayals that can be found in Disney animated films (1937 – 2016), identifying not only bodily impairment but also depictions of the social construct of disability. Although the ambiguity of disability made it difficult to code at times, the findings reveal the frequency of characters with impairments and disability and the context of how impairment and disability are portrayed. In this chapter, I attempt to answer all three research questions by providing descriptive data that reveals the frequency of impairment and disability in Disney animated films, how impairment and disability are represented, and the occurrence of these representations over time. Following this chapter, chapters five, six and seven provide in-depth film analysis of specific films related to key themes that emerged from the content analysis data that is presented in this chapter. In the additional analysis chapters, I also address research question 3a by discussing *how* representations have changed over time.

### **4.2 Results from the Content Analysis of Disney Animated Films (1937 – 2016)**

#### **4.2.1 Frequency of Characters**

Of the 56 films analysed, 36 contained one or more characters with an impairment or disability. And within these 36 films, there were 86 characters coded. Figure 4 shows the frequency of characters with an

impairment or disability over the decades of Disney animated films from the 1930s to the 2010s. The first peak was in the 1950s ( $n = 13$ ) (e.g. characters in *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan* and *Sleeping Beauty*), followed by the 2000s ( $n = 12$ ) (e.g. characters in *Treasure Planet*, *The Princess and the Frog*) and 2010s ( $n = 17$ ) (e.g. characters in *Tangled*, *Frozen* and *Big Hero 6*) which was the highest peak. The graph shows the frequency of characters with an impairment or disability over the decades and, most importantly, a clear upwards trajectory spanning two decades from the 1980s to the 2010s. This illustrates that, overall, Disney animated films have featured characters with an impairment or disability across all decades from the 1930s to the 2010s and specifically, that there has been an increase from the 1980s to the 2010s. This would suggest that there is an increase in the frequency of characters with an impairment or disability that appear on screen.

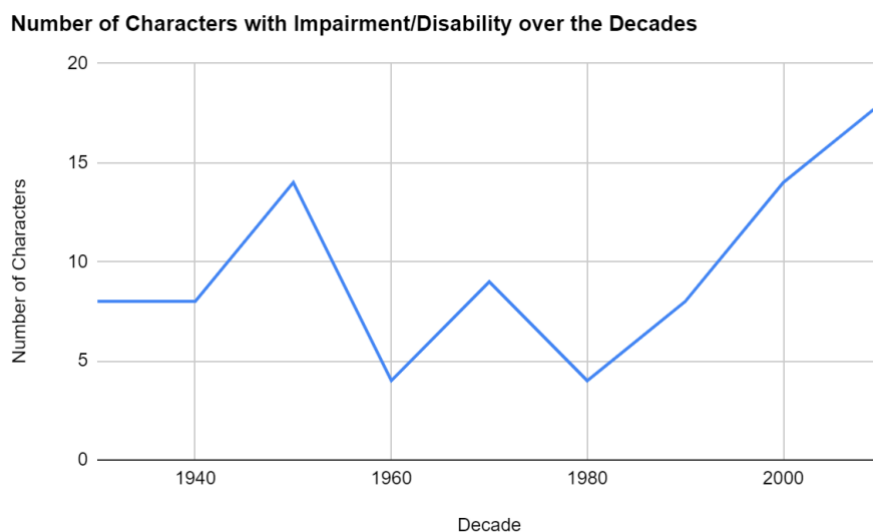


Figure 4 - A line graph showing the number of characters with impairment and disability over the decades.

#### 4.2.2 Type of Impairment

All characters were coded for their type of impairment, ranging from physical and mobility to visual and cognitive (see Figure 5). The highest

frequency was for physical impairment, which includes a range of impairments from dwarfism and disfigurement to physical differences that appear as magical powers. There were 30 characters coded with a physical impairment including the seven dwarfs, Captain Hook, Quasimodo and Elsa. This was followed by visual ( $n = 22$ ) (e.g. Mama Odie who is blind, and characters wearing glasses); mobility impairment where characters used a walking frame, walking stick or wheelchair ( $n = 9$ ) (e.g. Grandmama, Grandma Tala and the Evil Queen in disguise); mental impairment where characters had characteristics and traits associated with mood disorders, anxiety, depression, mania, bipolar disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder ( $n = 13$ ) (e.g. the Mad Hatter, Madam Mim, Maleficent and Eeyore); cognitive impairments ( $n = 6$ ) (e.g. the Goons, Le Fou and Ed the hyena); speech ( $n = 4$ ) (e.g. Ariel) and neurological ( $n = 2$ ) (e.g. Vanellope von Schweetz). This demonstrates that Disney characters have a wide range of impairments and characteristics; however, more context is needed about the characters and how their impairment or disability is portrayed.

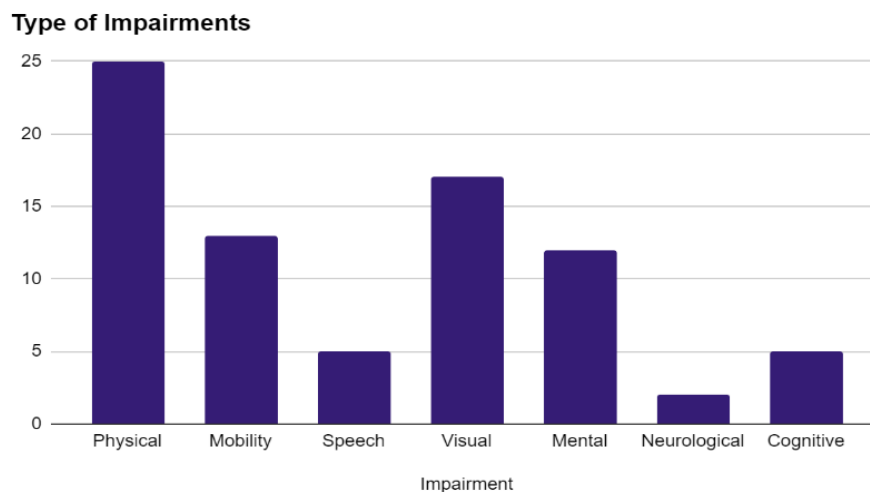


Figure 5 - A bar chart showing the number of characters for each type of impairment.

### **4.2.3 Impairment and Disability**

I have explicitly made the distinction between impairment and disability to identify characters with an impairment and those who have a societal construction on top of their impairment causing disability. For example, I have coded characters wearing glasses and using walking sticks such as Grandmama in *The Princess and the Frog* and Milo Thatch in *Atlantis: The Lost Empire*, which signify their visual or mobility impairment. However, these depictions do not go any further than that. Their impairment is not used in the plot other than existing as part of their characterisation. There were 55 characters coded with an impairment and 31 characters coded with disabled placed upon them (where the characters have an impairment or physical difference but become disabled by barriers such as environment, treatment or attitudes from other characters). These representations are meaningful, however, to ensure that the films represent a range of impairments. As the findings show, there is a high frequency of characters with a range of impairments ( $n = 55$ ) which is encouraging as it depicts impairment as a part of the character's life.

The characters coded as having a disability are those with an impairment or magical power, but within their narrative, it is socially created into a disability by physical, attitudinal, communication and social barriers (Cameron, 2014d; Garland-Thomson, 2017). For example, Quasimodo has physical impairments but also faces barriers in his society from the negative treatment and attitudes from an ableist society. Also, Elsa is a character who does not have an impairment per se but she has a magical power which is treated negatively by others in the same way an impairment is treated, therefore causing her to be disabled.

### **4.2.4 Gender**

Out of all 86 characters, 74% are male ( $n = 64$ ), and 26% are female ( $n = 22$ ). Table 4 shows the frequency of impairment and gender type. The

highest frequency for female characters was mental impairments ( $n = 6$ ), followed by mobility ( $n = 5$ ). For male characters, the highest frequency of impairment was physical ( $n = 21$ ), followed by visual ( $n = 14$ ). This illustrates that female characters are most often portrayed with mental impairments and male characters with physical impairments. This finding was quite striking and became one of the central points of my film analysis which I explore more in Chapter Five - Disability as a Symbol, Cause and Subversion of Evil in *The Lion King*, *Peter Pan*, *Treasure Planet*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent*.

Table 4 - Type of Impairment by Gender

<b>Impairment</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total</b>
Cognitive	0	6	6
Mental	6	7	13
Mobility	5	4	9
Neurological	1	1	2
Physical	4	26	30
Speech	2	2	4
Visual	4	18	22
<b>Total</b>	22	64	86

#### 4.2.5 Demographics

Out of the 86 characters coded, 55% were human ( $n = 47$ ) and 45% were anthropomorphic ( $n = 39$ ). Characters were also coded for their race/ethnicity, with the majority coded as white ( $n = 48$ ) (e.g. Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* and Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) followed by N/A ( $n = 31$ ) for anthropomorphic

characters who could not be assigned a race/ethnicity, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ( $n = 3$ ) (e.g. characters in *Moana*), Mixed ( $n = 2$ ) (e.g. Hiro in *Big Hero 6*), African American ( $n = 1$ ) (e.g. Mama Odie in *The Princess and the Frog*) and Hispanic ( $n = 1$ ). The top three films that featured a diverse ethnic representation were *The Princess and the Frog*, *Big Hero 6* and *Moana*. However, most characters in the films coded with an impairment or disability from 1937 to 2016 were either anthropomorphised animals or white human characters. However, it is worth noting that the vast majority of Disney characters are white in general.

Characters were also coded for their level of class. This was important to code to identify if there were any patterns between representations of impairment and disability associated with specific social class groups. The findings show an even distribution amongst all social class groups. The highest frequency, however, was for 'N/A,' where characters could not be associated with a specific class category, for example, anthropomorphised animals (e.g. the Cheshire Cat, Eeyore).

#### **4.2.6 Age and Age-Related**

Characters were coded for their age with the majority coded as adults ( $n = 58$ ) followed by elderly ( $n = 13$ ), teen ( $n = 10$ ) and child ( $n = 5$ ). In addition, all characters were coded *yes* or *no* if their impairment was age-related. All of the 13 elderly characters were also coded, with their impairment being age-related. Of these 13 characters, 8 had mobility impairments, and 5 had visual impairments. These characters were identified by a physical aid such as a walking stick or glasses. The function of impairment and disability code was also important as it identified the use of impairment or disability for these characters. This was useful as I could identify whether an elderly character's impairment or disability was portrayed as a description to depict their age or if the



disability was used for narrative purposes. The findings show that out of the 13 characters coded as elderly, 9 characters were coded with their impairment or disability function as description, which shows that these elderly characters with mobility or visual impairments are depicted in the film as a natural part of life.

The remaining 4 elderly characters were identified with their function of impairment or disability as a symbol of evil ( $n = 1$ ) (Madam Mim in *The Sword in the Stone*) and disguise ( $n = 3$ ) (the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Jafar in *Aladdin* and the Enchantress in *Beauty and the Beast*). However, Madam Mim, who was coded with her function as a symbol of evil, was elderly, but their age was not associated with the depiction of impairment or disability. For the 3 characters coded with their function of impairment or disability as disguise, impairment was specifically used as a disguise where adult characters disguised themselves as elderly characters identified by their appearance with a crooked back and use of mobility aid to trick another character. This shows how disability was used as a plot device symbolising evil compared to the characters coded as description.

#### **4.2.7 Character and Narrative Role**

The characters coded were 34% primary characters ( $n = 29$ ), 43% secondary characters ( $n = 37$ ) and 23% tertiary characters ( $n = 20$ ). This illustrates a distribution across all 3 of the character roles suggesting that characters with an impairment or disability appear not only as main characters such as heroes or villains but also as secondary characters in supporting roles as well as background characters. The narrative roles of characters were also coded, and the data shows a substantial number of characters with impairments and disability in the helper narrative role ( $n = 30$ ). The helper is a character that offers help to the hero in their journey. This was followed by 14 heroes (e.g. Ariel, Quasimodo and Elsa),

12 villains (e.g. Scar, Captain Hook, John Silver, Maleficent), 3 false heroes (e.g. the Evil Queen and Jafar), 4 dispatchers (e.g. Hook Hand and Gramma Tala) and 2 donors (e.g. Mama Odie). There were also characters coded as N/A ( $n = 16$ ) who did not meet the criteria for any of the narrative roles because they were secondary or tertiary characters that did not play a large role in the narrative. In addition, I created a new code labelled the sidekick for characters who met the criteria of the helper because they helped the villain rather than the hero ( $n = 4$ ) (e.g. Fidget, Le Fou, The Goons and Ed the hyena). These sidekicks can be categorised as 'disempowered sidekicks,' which are shaped by the perspective of the medical model of disability and 'reflects the need for comic relief as a means of reconciling the fear society has toward nonverbal disability' (Mintz, 2019, p. 67). I also extended this to include cognitive and intellectual impairment and disability. Furthermore, disempowered sidekicks were found in both the helper ( $n = 2$ ) and sidekick ( $n = 4$ ) narrative roles, depending on their association with the hero or the villain.

#### **4.2.8 Function of Impairment and Disability**

One of the most important factors to contextualise how disability is portrayed is the narrative function of a character's impairment (see Figure 6). 48 characters were coded with their function of impairment as a description. This is when an impairment is part of their characteristic and does not signify anything further than an impairment that the character possesses, such as wearing glasses, using a walking stick or having side-effects from a temporary accident. This is followed by humour where 15 character's impairment and disability are used as comic relief (e.g. Dopey in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Le Fou in *Beauty and the Beast* and Hei Hei in *Moana*) and 11 characters where impairment and disability are used as a symbol of evil (13%) (e.g. Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, Scar in *The Lion King*, Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*). This is followed by

impairment or disability used as a punishment ( $n = 5$ ) (e.g. the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*), magical power ( $n = 4$ ) (e.g. Elsa in *Frozen*) and disguise ( $n = 3$ ) (e.g. the Enchantress in *Beauty and the Beast*).

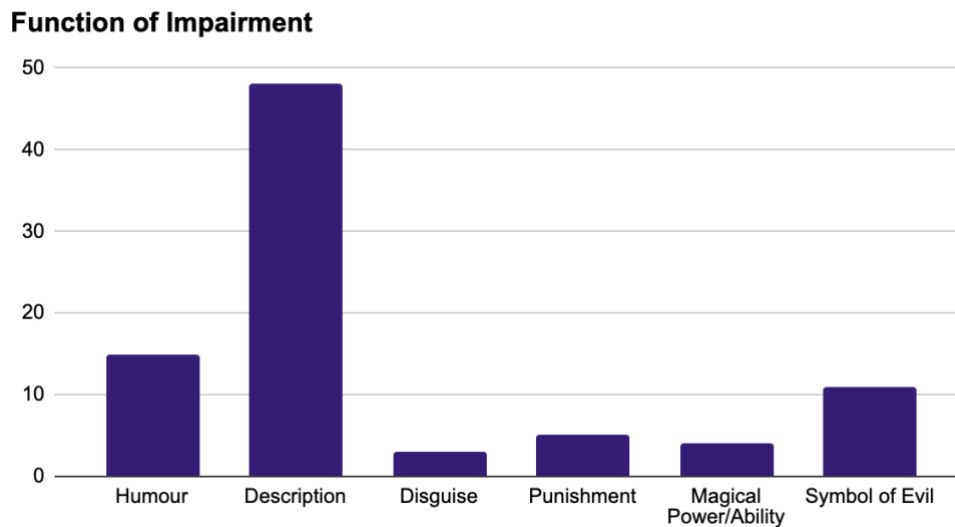


Figure 6 - A bar chart showing the number of characters for function of impairment categories.

The 5 codes - humour, disguise, punishment, magical power or ability and symbol of evil - demonstrate the various ways impairment and disability are used. This relates to Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis (2000), where disability is often used as a narrative device and metaphorical crutch where a character's impairment or disability is emphasised or relied upon to depict deviance and exclusion. The codes in the function of impairment and disability category relate to stereotypes of disability that are frequently used in film, literature and media. The findings from this code specifically impairment and disability as a symbol of evil, as punishment and as a magical power were significant enough that they have been discussed in more detail in the following films analysis chapters where I focus on villains and evilness, heroes and overcoming, and magical powers read as disability.

#### 4.2.8.1 Humour

There were 15 characters coded under the 'humour' code, where a character's impairment or disability is used as comic relief. Berger (2016) notes the difference between 'disabling humour' and 'disability humour,' which emphasises the difference between laughing *at* disabled people and laughing *with* them. The former is negative towards disabled people because of the ableist assumptions and representations that are embedded in our culture. In Disney films, humour is more than often used as disabling humour. This is particularly present with characters such as helpers and sidekicks with cognitive or intellectual impairment characteristics, which are associated with low intelligence and are used for comic relief. The use of disability as humour was popularised in the 1900s when disability was used in slapstick comedy silent films (Berger, 2015; Norden, 1994), followed by the freak show (Garland-Thomson, 1996). As a result, the use of disability as humour and comic relief has been perpetuated throughout popular culture over the decades. Although some scholars have identified an increase in *disability* humour rather than *disabling* humour where a social commentary is provided (Haller, 2010; Pritchard, 2021c; Wilde, 2018); in Disney animated films, the use of disability as humour is present across most decades as *disabling* humour rather than disability humour.

The disempowered sidekicks are a key example of how disability is used for comic relief depicting characters with characteristics that can be identified as ableist and stereotypical traits of intellectual or cognitive impairments. For example, depictions of the dwarfs in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937 reinforce disabling stereotypes. As Watson (2020) states, 'the humorous depiction and exaggerated cuteness of the Seven Dwarfs are particularly problematic today as Disney films are seen primarily by children' (p. 144). The findings from this study suggest that Disney has continued to use depictions of impairment and disability,

particularly associated with the disempowered sidekicks, throughout the company's history. Although this is an outdated stereotype associated with slapstick comedy and the freak show eras, it has appeared in films throughout the decades from 1937 (Dopey in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*) to 2016 with Hei Hei in *Moana*.

#### **4.2.8.2 Disguise**

Impairment and disability are used as a disguise in 3 Disney films where non-disabled characters use aspects of impairment as a tool to appear as disabled (Berube, 2016). Often, a character pretends to be disabled to scare or trick another character into achieving a goal. This type of disability is seen in 3 characters: the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Jafar in *Aladdin* and the Enchantress in *Beauty and the Beast*. In all 3 films, the characters disguise themselves as elderly disabled characters with crooked backs and a walking stick. These are all temporary depictions where the character transforms from able-bodied to disabled and back again. This use of disability is problematic as it is depicted as something temporary and used as a tool rather than part of the character's identity. However, it is encouraging that there are only 3 characters whose impairment is used this way out of the 13 elderly characters depicted with mobility and physical impairments. Therefore, although this stereotypical representation of disability occurs in Disney animated films, more characters with the same impairment are portrayed more progressively. Furthermore, although outside the scope of this research, it is useful to note that the live-action versions of *Aladdin* (2019) and *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) do not include disability as a tool through disguise as it appears in the original animated films.

#### **4.2.8.3 Punishment**

Impairment and disability associated with punishment are often related to the moral model of disability. This is where impairment and disability are linked to religion as God's punishment for sin, and the association between a character's behaviour and disability is highlighted. Doing this implies that impairment is an acceptable punishment for bad behaviour. Furthermore, punishments for impairment and disability are often used temporarily so that the character can return to the expected level of able-bodiedness. There were 5 characters coded with their function of impairment and disability as a punishment, including the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast* and Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*. The use of disability as punishment is one of the most striking examples of narrative prosthesis where disability is used as a plot device and often involves a character's transformation from 'normal' to disabled before transforming back to 'normal' before the film's end. By utilising disability in this way, the narrative focuses on characters overcoming disability which 'reinforce[s] oppressive ideas of normalcy, sentimentalise, and solidify stereotypes about disability' (Hall, 2015, p. 4). This is another code that I will discuss in more detail in the film analysis chapters specifically in Chapter Six - Otherness, Overcoming and Acceptance: Disability as a Temporary Problem and Cause of Social Exclusion in *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

#### **4.2.8.4 Magical Power or Ability**

In this code, 4 characters have a magical power or ability in Disney animated films: Dumbo in *Dumbo*, Rapunzel in *Tangled*, Vanellope von Schweetz in *Wreck-It Ralph* and Elsa in *Frozen*. These characters' powers or physical differences are treated within their narratives as a disability. One of the key aspects of these representations is how society treats their

difference, which causes their disability. Through the lens of the social model, it is clear that other characters cause barriers to the character mainly through their attitudes and treatment. This causes shame, fear and exclusion; however, it also allows the narrative to provide a social commentary on the treatment of the character who has is different. For example, Elsa in *Frozen* has ice powers which she struggles to control. Because of this, her parents isolate her in her bedroom, and she is never given a chance to learn to manage her powers. This presents a complex depiction of disability resulting in Elsa's isolation, fear and lack of identity.

In contrast, *Dumbo* has extra-large ears that he is ridiculed for and subsequently disabled by his society. However, by the end of the film, he uses his ears to fly and is accepted by others. Certain readings of *Dumbo* could read this depiction as a supercrip stereotype because he 'triumphs over adversity' (Cameron, p. 144) and achieves beyond the 'normal' expectations (Barnes, 1992). But on the other hand, *Dumbo* could be read through the affirmation model of disability, where impairment and disability are celebrated to overcome stigma and affirm divergence from normalcy (Cameron, 2014a; Gibson, 2022). Interestingly, 3 of the 4 characters coded with a magical power or ability are from films from the 2010s and feature progressive representations of disability as a social problem. In these representations, the character's physical difference - encoded as a magical power or ability - is treated negatively at first. Still, throughout the film, the character overcomes the stigma without having to overcome their power and is accepted by society. For instance, Elsa's experience does not portray her as a supercrip who is overcoming a disability which leads to super-abilities. Instead, she is a person with super-abilities that are portrayed as disabling (Schmiesing, 2018) as I will develop in Chapter Seven - From Exclusion to Affirmation: Disability as a Magical Power in *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen*.

#### **4.2.8.5 Symbol of Evil**

There were 11 characters that were coded as having their impairment or disability used as a symbol of evil; this was associated with villains and villain sidekicks. This is a stereotype of disability that has been frequently used in literature, film and media. As Barnes (1992) states, 'the depiction of disabled people as essentially evil has been a particular favourite among filmmakers. The list of films which connect impairment to wickedness and villainy is virtually endless' (p. 11). In recent cultural disability studies literature, the trope of disability as a symbol of evil is still frequently discussed because of its reoccurrence (Jeffress, 2021; Longmore, 2003; Norden, 1994b). For example, in Disney films, there is an association between villainy and disability. Out of the 11 characters coded in the symbol of evil category, there were 7 male characters and 4 females. All 7 male characters were coded with a physical impairment (e.g. Captain Hook has a missing limb and Scar has a facial scar). In contrast, all 4 females were coded with a mental impairment where they had traits associated with mental health conditions (e.g. Cruella de Vil in *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* and Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty*). The use of disability as a symbol of evil is something I pick up on later in the film analysis chapters, specifically the next chapter, Chapter Five - Disability as a Symbol, Cause and Subversion of Evil in *The Lion King*, *Peter Pan*, *Treasure Planet*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent*.

#### **4.2.9 Temporary or Long-Term**

The findings show that 84% of characters had a long-term impairment or disability ( $n = 72$ ) compared to 16% of characters with a temporary impairment ( $n = 14$ ). I have identified 3 uses of temporary impairments in the findings. Firstly, temporary impairments are utilised when a character has had an accident and becomes injured or experiences a



mental health conditions (e.g. Trusty breaks his leg in *Lady and the Tramp*, Hiro experiences depression following the death of his brother in *Big Hero 6*, and Anna is injured from Elsa's ice powers in *Frozen*). Secondly, temporary impairments are used as disguise where characters (often villains) pretend to be disabled, using aspects of impairment as a tool to scare or entice other characters (e.g. the Enchantress in *Beauty and the Beast* and Jafar in *Aladdin*). And finally, temporary impairments are used as something a character must overcome, which often forwards the plot (e.g. Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* and the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*). A crosstab comparison (see table 5) was conducted between the function of impairment and the temporary and long-term code, which revealed temporary impairments were used as a description ( $n = 6$ ), disguise ( $n = 3$ ) and punishment ( $n = 5$ ) with the punishment function requiring the character to overcome or fix their impairment. In comparison, long-term impairments were coded as being used for description ( $n = 43$ ), humour ( $n = 15$ ), magical power ( $n = 4$ ), and a symbol of evil ( $n = 10$ ). This illustrates how temporary impairments are often used as plot devices in the narrative, such as punishment and disguise.

On the other hand, long-term impairments are assigned to characters throughout the film, such as description, humour, and a symbol of evil. Interestingly, magical power and ability were coded as long-term impairments rather than temporary ones that the characters must overcome. This illustrates how characters with impairments encoded as magical powers (e.g. Dumbo, Vanellope, Elsa) become disabled by the attitudes and barriers in reaction to their powers. But, since they are long-term, the characters do not have to overcome them but instead can live with them and become accepted by others.

Table 5 - Function of Impairment by Long-Term and Temporary Categories

	<b>Long-Term</b>	<b>Temporary</b>
<b>Description</b>	43	6
<b>Disguise</b>	0	3
<b>Humour</b>	15	0
<b>Magical Power</b>	4	0
<b>Punishment</b>	0	5
<b>Symbol of Evil</b>	10	0

#### **4.2.10 Implied or Labelled in Narrative**

A code was created to categorise whether a character's impairment or disability was implied or labelled within the narrative. This was adapted from Doberstein's (2019) study, one of the only coding systems I found in the literature that analysed representations of disability in film through qualitative content analysis. There were 9 categories within this code, with the 'implied in narrative' category coded the most frequently ( $n = 40$ ). The 'implied in narrative' category was assigned to a character when their impairment or disability existed in the narrative and was implied by the way it was represented, often as a description and part of a character's life (e.g. Hiro in *Big Hero 6*, Lucky Jack in *Home on the Range* and Anna in *Frozen*). This was followed by 'labelled by narrative' ( $n = 25$ ), where a narrative has placed a disability label on top of a character with an impairment through social and cultural barriers. This was the case for characters such as Dopey in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Scar in *The Lion King* and Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*. Following this, there were impairments that were 'acquired' ( $n = 7$ ) (e.g. Trusty in *Lady and the Tramp* and Otto in *Robin Hood*, 'self-identified' ( $n = 6$ ) (e.g. Madam Mim in *The Sword in the Stone* and Mama Odie in *The Princess and the Frog*), 'changing' ( $n = 5$ ) (e.g. Beggar Jafar in *Aladdin* and the Enchantress in

*Beauty and the Beast*) and 'labelled by other characters' ( $n = 3$ ) (e.g. Dumbo in *Dumbo*).

### **4.3 Discussion**

The findings from the content analysis that I have presented in this chapter provide a compelling insight into the representation of impairment and disability in the corpus of Disney animated films from 1937 to 2016. The primary goal of this research was to identify the frequency of impairment and disability in Disney animated films across the decades from the 1930s to the 2010s and illustrate how these characters appear in the films in an attempt to gain a greater understanding of the representation of disability. The findings show that there is a wide range of impairments and a great occurrence of disability which function for a range of reasons from description (e.g. existing as part of a character's identify such as wearing glasses or temporarily broken leg) to a symbol of evil (e.g. where disability is used as a plot device such as to symbolise a character's evilness). This finding supports Longmore's (2013) claim that:

When one examines images of people with disability in television and film, one encounters two striking facts. First, one discovers hundreds of characters with all sorts of disabilities... The second striking fact is how much we overlook the prevalence of disability and the frequent presence of disabled characters. (p. 1)

The findings illustrate there is a large amount of seemingly more neutral description portrayals of impairment where it exists without the societal barriers imposed on top of it. In addition, many of these depictions were also implied in the narrative rather than labelled which shows they exist within the narratives without a negative label. This is encouraging because it is important to see these types of portrayals in Disney animated films so that impairment is represented as part of a character's

everyday life. Furthermore, these depictions occur for most types of impairments where a character has an impairment as part of their life such as using a mobility device for a mobility impairment or wearing glasses for a visual impairment, rather than defining their character. In these cases, impairment exists without stereotypical depictions and thus, does not become a representation of disability as defined through the social model of disability.

It is clear, however, that several of these representations needed a more critical and detailed analysis as their impairment becomes a disability in the narrative because of its treatment. Therefore, following the content analysis, I chose to focus on selected films according to the themes and findings that emerged from the data. Specifically, these were the function codes of disability as a symbol of evil, disability as a punishment and disability as a magical power. As a result, the second phase of the analysis for this study will involve analysis of the selected films to explore in detail how the films utilise, portray and rely on disability for narrative purposes.

#### **4.3.1 Disability as Symbol of Evil**

The findings from the content analysis revealed that there is a reliance upon characters with an impairment and disability who are villains or sidekicks associated with the villains. There were 11 characters coded with their impairment or disability used as a symbol of evil across the decades. This finding was particularly significant because of its frequency across the decades and therefore, I believe it is useful to further analyse a selection of these characters to look at how their disability functions within the narrative of the film. In addition, out of the 11 characters, 7 of them were male and 4 were female. All of the male characters were coded with a physical impairment whereas the female characters were coded with mental impairments. This was a striking finding which

demonstrates the reliance upon physical impairment for male villains and mental impairments for female villains. This gender divide is something that I will also explore to look at how disability functions differently for male and female villainous characters. Therefore, in chapter five, I explore the representation of disability as a symbol of evil, focusing on Scar in *The Lion King* (1994), Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* (1953), and John Silver in *Treasure Planet* (2002). In addition, I discuss Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) as a female villain who is associated with mental health conditions. I also look at the live-action film *Maleficent* (2014) to argue how the live-action re-telling provides a backstory which involves depicting disability as a social construct. By carrying out further film analysis on these specific characters, I argue that disability functions as a symbol, cause and subversion in male villains and a social construct in female villains.

#### **4.3.2 Disability as Punishment**

Another key finding from the content analysis which will be explored in more detail, in chapter six, is disability as a punishment. There were 5 characters who were coded with their function of impairment as a punishment. This is when the theme of disability is used as a punishment and often, the characters are transformed to overcome their impairment. This is a key example of narrative prosthesis where disability is used as a plot device. Because of this, it would be useful to analyse a selection of these characters to explore how disability is used as a punishment and something that must be overcome to be accepted by society. For this, I selected the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989) to demonstrate how disability is used as a punishment and the characters must be transformed back to their normative state to be accepted by others. In addition, I chose to analyse the portrayal of Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* because

although he was not coded in this category, disability functions as a problem that causes social exclusion and the ways in which disability themes are portrayed is worth exploring and comparing to the other two films.

### **4.3.3 Disability as Magical Power**

The third significant finding which is worthy of further analysis is disability used as a magical power. The data shows that 4 characters are portrayed with magical powers, which can be read as a physical difference that others treat negatively to reveal a disability narrative. For this, I analyse the characters Van Helsing in *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) and Elsa in *Frozen* (2013). These portrayals require a specific reading of disability as a social construct to demonstrate how characters who have magical powers or abilities are treated negatively which draws parallels to the social model of disability. In this way, the films provide a social commentary on the treatment the characters receive because they are different. Following the characters journey throughout the film, these portrayals provide a progression representation of disability because by the end of the film, the characters are accepted by others without overcoming or fixing their physical differences. 3 out of the 4 characters that were coded with a magical power or ability were from films in the 2010s which shows these are recent improvements in the representation of disability.

In the following three chapters, I will discuss the findings from the film analysis focusing on the themes of disability as a symbol of evil, disability as a punishment or problem to overcome, and disability as a magical power. I will argue throughout the chapters that there is progression from the traditional and stereotypical depictions of disability where it functions as a plot device towards more affirmative representations that provide a

social commentary to highlight the role that society plays in disabling individuals with impairments and the evolution towards disability existing as part of a character's life.

## **5. Chapter Five - Disability as a Symbol, Cause and Subversion of Evil in *The Lion King*, *Peter Pan*, *Treasure Planet*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent***

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter argues that impairment and disability are associated with several Disney villains to emphasise their evilness. The content analysis findings in the previous chapter show that impairment and disability are frequently used as a sign of evil. In the findings, there are 11 characters associated with evil. These characters were identified as villains, helpers or sidekicks. The findings reveal how impairment and disability are used to symbolise their evil traits. This is compared to their able-bodied counterparts, who may show signs of struggle that lead to mental distress or physical impairment; however, this is often overcome so that they can progress their story, restore normalcy and ultimately live happily ever after. This demonstrates a reliance on using long-term and permanent impairments associated with villains and circumstantial and temporary impairments with characters such as heroes. The contrast of temporary versus long-term impairments illustrates how disability is frequently used as a narrative device. The use of impairment and disability as a temporary problem to overcome is the main theme of the following chapter, Chapter Six - Otherness, Overcoming and Acceptance: Disability as a Temporary Problem and Cause of Social Exclusion in *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

In this chapter, Disability as a Symbol, Cause and Subversion of Evil in *The Lion King*, *Peter Pan*, *Treasure Planet*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent*, I argue that the use of impairment and disability associated with Disney villains is to emphasise and symbolise their evilness. Furthermore, the content analysis data reveals a gender divide between



the villains and the impairment type. All male villains have physical impairments, whereas females have traits associated with mental impairments. Consequently, I have analysed three male villains: Scar from *The Lion King* (1994), Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* (1953) and John Silver from *Treasure Planet* (2002), for the use of physical impairment. By analysing and comparing these villains, I show that disability is treated alternately as a *symbol of evil*, a *cause of evil* and a *subversion of evil* in its association with villainy. In addition, I also analyse Maleficent, the female villain, to consider how traits associated with mental impairments are used to accentuate her wickedness. To do this, I briefly analyse the original animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). In addition, I also analyse the live-action film *Maleficent* (2014) to highlight how Disney's retelling of the classic animated film provide a more nuanced representation of disability for modern audiences. By doing this in *Maleficent*, Disney addresses mental health conditions and the issues around that, by providing a backstory to Maleficent involving physical impairment through the violent act of removing her wings. I argue that this depicts disability as a social construct and shows how characters can be re-represented in the world of Disney to provide productive and progressive understandings of disability.

## **5.2 The Origin of Disability and Villainy**

The association of physical impairment and Disney villains has occurred since the first animated shorts were created by Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks in the 1920s. A character called Peg-Leg Pete, who has a wooden leg, was the first villain created by the Walt Disney studio. Although he was created three years before Mickey Mouse, he went on to become the main antagonist in Mickey Mouse short films. Today, he is the oldest recurring character that continues to appear in Mickey Mouse television series and films (Wasko, 2020). The creation of Peg-Leg Pete was likely

influenced by the cultural representations of pirate villains with wooden legs in literature (Norden, 1994b). This is also the case for Captain Hook and John Silver – both characters are pirate villains who I discuss in more detail in this chapter – are adapted from original novels by Disney. Peg-Leg Pete, in certain portrayals, appears without his wooden leg visible. His prosthetic leg was addressed in the 1941 comic *The Mystery at Hidden River*, where Pete tells Mickey Mouse that his peg leg was replaced with a more realistic prosthetic. Nevertheless, this shows that the association between physical impairment and villains has occurred throughout the history of Disney animation, from its first animated shorts to the latest feature films.

### **5.3 Physical Impairment in *The Lion King's* Villain, Scar**

*The Lion King* is Disney's 32<sup>nd</sup> animated film, released in 1994. It became one of the most successful films in the Disney Renaissance era, alongside *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*. *The Lion King* also has sequel films, television series, merchandise, Broadway productions, theme park attractions and a live-action remake following the film's success (Wasko, 2020). *The Lion King* is a story that focuses on a lion prince called Simba who has to overcome the loss of his father, Mufasa, and his evil uncle, Scar, to become the rightful king of the Pride Lands.

Scar is the film's villain who wants to become king and will do anything possible to take the throne, including killing his brother, Mufasa and scaring away his nephew, Simba, so that he can take over and become king. In the film, impairment plays a central role in Scar's characterisation, specifically his physical appearance. He has a scar over his left eye and is named Scar after this. His character role is a villain; therefore, the association between physical impairment and villainy is presented to the viewer. However, Scar's backstory of how he acquired

his scar is not provided in the film. The appearance of a facial scar does signify violence, and thus, it can be presumed that the scar was acquired during a fight or altercation. The emphasis on Scar's facial scar and his association with villainy demonstrates how it is used as a symbol of evil in the story. Indeed, as Garland-Thomson (1997) claims, 'focusing on a body feature to describe a character throws the reader into a confrontation with the character that is predetermined by cultural notions of disability' (p. 11).

Furthermore, Kirby (2018) states three purposes for antagonists with physical impairments such as facial scars in literature and film: a reflection of evil, a cost of evil and a driver of evil. The author refers to Scar from *The Lion King* as an example of an antagonist with an impairment which is used as a reflection of evil. Moreover, several disability studies scholars have highlighted how many disabled villains are depicted as bitter and jealous (Longmore, 2003; Norden, 1994). This illustrates how villains often have an impairment to signify the cost of becoming evil, or the impairment is depicted as the reason for their evilness. In this way, a character's impairment is used as the focus of their motives and actions. In the portrayal of Scar, his facial scar is not used as the source of his evilness and does not play a role in driving his actions; therefore, the scar can be categorised as a reflection of evil (Kirby, 2018). I would argue that the scar is associated with Scar's evil traits and has been added to his characterisation as a villain. It does not define his narrative, unlike many villains in popular culture (Klecker & Grabher, 2022), because his jealousy of being king is the main drive for his motives. However, it does consume him because he is named after his physical impairment, and thus, it is used as a symbol and/or reflection of his evilness.

Scar is first in line to the throne until his brother and king of the Pride Lands, Mufasa, has a son called Simba. Now his chances of becoming king are very unlikely. He can only become king once Mufasa and Simba die. From the film's beginning, Scar is depicted as miserable and fed up because he cannot be king. He is portrayed as a static character because, throughout the film, he remains the same in the storyline; he is evil from the beginning to the end. His only goal throughout the film is to take the throne, and his evilness results from his jealousy of not being king. In the first scene that features Scar, he picks up a mouse and states, 'Life's not fair, is it? You see, I... Well, I shall never be king.' Moments later, when Mufasa appears and asks Scar why he did not turn up to the presentation of Simba, it is evident that Scar is irritated and jealous. He says, 'Well, I was first in line until the little hairball was born.' In this scene, as Mufasa and Scar continue to argue back and forth, it is clear that Mufasa's status as king and the recent birth of Simba has ruined their relationship as brothers. They are now at opposing ends of the hierarchy, and the contrast between good and evil manifests in their relationship. This dualism of good and evil is evident in their opposing hierarchical positions in the Pride Lands as well as their physical appearance and behaviour.

The physical differences between Mufasa and Scar emphasise the contrast between good and evil (Garland-Thomson, 2017; Kirby, 2018) and are embodied in the appearance of the characters. Mufasa has amber-coloured fur with lighter fur around his mouth and a dark red mane. Scar, on the other hand, has dark brown fur, a grey beard, and a sleek black mane, suggesting that darker features correlate to his villainy. Scar's large paws with long black claws are focused on in several shots as he sharpens and gestures with them throughout the film. The focus on his sharp claws contributes to his characterisation as a villain with a vicious

nature. However, this is not the case for other lions whose long claws are not exposed or focused on in the film. In addition, Scar also has a low voice and cunning appearance, contributing to his characterisation as a villain. His green eyes, in particular, represent his jealousy towards Mufasa and Simba because he wants to become king. This has implications relating to representations of race as it marks Scar's blackness as non-normative and other, particularly as it is associated with evilness. Whereas whiteness, portrayed through the colouring of the other lions, is associated with characters who are central in the story, unmarked and survive; black characters 'struggle, die, are forced to overcome, or haunt narratives' (Nadkarni, para 9). Ebony Thomas (2019) claims that 'the Dark Other is the spectacle, the monstrous Thing that is the root cause of *hesitation, ambivalence, and the uncanny*' (p. 23). Furthermore, she asserts that 'the implicit messages that readers, hearers, and viewers of color receive as they read these texts is that *we are the villains. We are the horde. We are the enemies. We are the monsters* (Thomas, 2019, p. 23). Nadkarni (2019) echoes this as she states:

I wonder if others, like me, have had a moment of connection with a character *because they look like me* and then immediately refused to invest in them because loving a PoC character in fantasy media is a recipe to getting your heart destroyed when they inevitably are evil/ sacrifice themselves/ are killed off/ abruptly disappear when the show's budget gets tighter (para 10)

As such, Scar's darker features emphasise his power and villainy which perpetuates his otherness and is associated with racial and ableist stereotypes. This shows how the dichotomy between good and evil is exemplified in Mufasa and Scar. And in relation to disability specifically, it is clear that the association between Scar's facial scar and his villainy can be identified through the medical model of disability. As Leduc (2020)

argues, 'in the medical model, disability is almost always the villain. Disability is difference because there is an assumption that there is one way of moving through the world' (p. 37). As a result, there is a clear difference between Scar who has a physical impairment, darker features and is evil in comparison to Mufasa who is able-bodied, has lighter features and is good.

### **5.3.1 Extended Villainy and Disempowered Sidekicks**

In addition to Scar's characterisation, scholars have argued that the hyenas (Scar's sidekicks) are problematic portrayals as they can be recognised as black and Hispanic characters. They are associated with villainy and depicted as existing in the film as 'lurking about in a jungle version of a ghetto' (Wasko, 2020, p. 152). Indeed, there is a distinct difference between the Pride Lands, where the rest of the lions live, which is bright and sunny, and the dark graveyard setting that Scar and the hyenas inhabit. The colouring in both settings emphasises the difference between good and bad in Mufasa and Scar respectively.

Scar's hyenas help him in his plot to take the throne. The film focuses on three hyenas in particular who are used as what I would term 'extended villainy,' when secondary characters possess certain villainous traits to extend the evilness of the main villain. Extended villainy is often used for characters such as helpers and sidekicks. The hyenas, in this case, are portrayed as lacking gracefulness, malicious and foolish which contributes to the extended villainy of Scar. In addition, they are characterised similarly with dark features and inhabiting the dark graveyard setting contributing to their association with villainy.

One hyena called Ed also has smaller pupils that appear cross-eyed, a protruding tongue, and does not talk. These features can be associated with Mintz's (2019) 'disempowered sidekick' (p. 67). As discussed in

*Chapter Two: Literature Review on Disability Studies and Disney Studies*, there is a common association between sidekicks and stereotypical characteristics of intellectual impairments in Disney characters (Schwartz et al., 2013). Characters including Dopey and Le Fou have been identified by disability studies scholars as characters with intellectual impairments used for comic relief and shaped from the perspective of the medical model of disability. Mintz (2019) states, 'each [character] reflects the need for comic relief as a means of reconciling the fear society has toward nonverbal disability' (p. 67), and I would also add intellectual and cognitive disability to this claim. Furthermore, Schwartz et al. (2013) reveal five ways in which intellectual disability is created and perpetuated in animated Disney characters:

- 1) The language used about the character
- 2) The physical appearance of the character
- 3) The way the character is presented vis-à-vis other characters
- 4) The role into which the character has been cast
- 5) The character's competencies [or lack thereof] (p. 154)

Schwartz et al. (2013) explain that facial features include oddly shaped or missing teeth, crossed and rolling eyes, large ears, and a protruding tongue. In addition, speech and language are often not present or difficult to understand, and clothing is ill-fitting. In *The Lion King*, Ed, the hyena, can be identified in this way because of his physical appearance, which is different from other hyenas (Figure 7). In addition, the character's role as Scar's sidekick perpetuates the disempowered sidekick, and the language used about the hyena refers to his intelligence or lack thereof. For instance, during the 'Be Prepared' musical scene, Scar sings directly to Ed, stating:

But thick as you are

Pay attention

My words are a matter of pride

It's clear from your vacant expressions

The lights are not all on upstairs

In this part of the song, Scar refers to the sidekick's lack of intelligence. And because this is directed to the particular hyena with specific stereotypical features, it is clear that an association can be made between the character's appearance and intelligence, likely for comic relief. Indeed, Schwartz et al. (2013) claim that in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the individual personalities and distinct features of the dwarfs, including the characterisation of Dopey, were a Disney fabrication rather than a part of the original Grimm's fairy tale. However, this perpetuates stereotypical representations of disability (Pritchard, 2021b; Watson, 2020). The findings from the content analysis show that 6 characters can be identified in this way, often possessing several of the features described above by Schwartz et al. (2013). These characters feature in films throughout Disney's history, from their first animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), to one of their most recent animated films, *Moana* (2016). This demonstrates that the use of 'disempowered sidekicks' in *The Lion King* is a common component of Disney animated films and continues to be used as a tool for comic relief.





*Figure 7 - Ed the hyena (on the right) alongside two other hyenas.*

### **5.3.2 'Long Live the King': Scar's Hunt for the Throne**

As the film progresses, Scar's jealousy of not being king turns into anger and violence. In the 'Be Prepared' musical sequence - Scar's 'I Want' song - green and black colouring and dark lighting are used in the mise-en-scene, contrasting the bright and colourful Pride Lands where Simba, Mufasa and the rest of the lions live. As the scene reaches the song's climax, the green colouring changes to red to intensify Scar's determination of his forthcoming actions. Throughout this scene, the colour and lighting are used to create a frightening atmosphere, and non-diegetic sounds of background music and lightning strikes can be heard whilst Scar is singing to increase the atmosphere of the scene. In addition, several low-angle shots are used when Scar stands at the top of the caves. The lighting in this frame (Figure 8) depicts a large shadow of Scar, creating a dramatic effect and depicting him in a powerful position as he overlooks the army of hyenas.

The shot of Scar at the top of the cliff, in particular, depicts him staging his own Nuremberg rally with shots similar to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* propaganda film (Jones, 2019). As Scar is positioned at the top of the cliff, he overlooks the hyena army marching past him as they sing and conform to his plan of killing his brother and claiming the throne. Jones (2019) claims that viewers have picked up the similarities and references to Nazi propaganda at the time of the film's release but also notes that other critics claimed it was a cultural reference intended for adults. Nevertheless, the images in this scene are powerful. They not only stress Scar's strong desire to be king but also that he wants to be a dictator.



*Figure 8 - Scar in a position of power overlooking the army of hyenas.*

Scar's wicked actions continue when he leads his army of hyenas in his plot to take the throne. In the scene where Scar kills Mufasa, Mufasa is trying to save Simba but gets stuck on the gorge. Scar watches on and refuses to help. He then grabs Mufasa's paws, and at this point, using a medium two-shot, the two characters are positioned in the frame opposite one another so that Scar's facial scar is in full view (Figure 9). Scar then

states, 'Long live the king,' and throws Mufasa off the gorge, where he falls to his death into a stampede. Simba looks on as his father falls but is unaware that Scar throws Mufasa off the gorge. Moments later, Scar convinces Simba that his father's death was his fault, and he must run away. At the same time, Scar orders the hyenas to follow Simba and kill him, but they are unsuccessful. These actions demonstrate how far Scar is willing to go to become king and dictator of the Pride Lands. When Scar returns to the Pride Lands with the news of the death of Mufasa and Simba, he successfully takes over the throne.



*Figure 9 - Scar holding onto Mufasa before he throws him off the gorge to his death.*

### **5.3.3 Why a Scar? Disability as a Symbol of Evil**

In *The Lion King*, when a single shot is used to depict Scar, his left side is almost always positioned in focus so that his scar can be seen in the frame. In addition, close-up shots are frequently used to focus on his facial expressions, sharp teeth and scar. The close-up shots allow his face to fill the frame to emphasise his facial features, including his darker

appearance – in comparison to the other lions – his sharp teeth to denote violence and his facial scar. This suggests there is a focus on his scar as part of his characterisation as a villain and to symbolise his evilness. However, his scar does not play a central role in the reason for his actions. His villainy is a result of jealousy for not being king and his determination to overthrow the throne. Therefore, the scar is not a cause of evil as it is for Captain Hook, whom I discuss next. It is, however, a symbol of evil which still perpetuates the disability as evil trope because of its association.

So why a scar? I would argue that the scar has been added as an indirect characterisation to accentuate his wickedness. It is not used as a reason for Scar being a villain but as part of his characterisation as one. As Leduc (2020) states:

Scar, the erstwhile villain who embodies disfigurement of both the body and soul. He dies in the end, eradicated in the way that all true evil should be. Except it isn't evil, really... he took the name Scar to remind himself that jealousy and hate almost cost him an eye – but jealousy doesn't have as much of an impact as a name, does it? (p. 88)

From this, Leduc identifies how Scar's facial scar is not what makes him evil. Scar is second in line to the throne and has to live in the shadow of his powerful brother. And thus, his behaviour is out of jealousy of not being king. However, he is still the embodiment of impairment associated with evil and as a consequence, perpetuates the disability as evil trope. Indeed, this is still problematic because of the association between impairment and evil that continues to be portrayed in cultural representations (Garland-Thomson, 2017). Nevertheless, because Scar does not acknowledge his scar throughout the film's diegesis, nor does it

play a role in the reason behind his violent actions, I argue that the scar is simply used as a shorthand for evil but does not go any deeper than this.

#### **5.4 'Did Pan show good form when he did this to me?': Physical Impairment and Captain Hook**

If for Scar, impairment is used as a symbol of evil, for Captain Hook, impairment is the cause of evil (Kirby, 2018). Therefore, the association between disability and villainy in Hook's case is not just a matter of characterisation but of narrative. Take away impairment, and Hook is just an ordinary pirate captain who would not be seeking revenge because of his acquired impairment, nor would he be called Captain *Hook*. This shows how integral disability is to the narrative of *Peter Pan* and Captain Hook's storyline.

Captain Hook is the villain in Disney's 14th animated feature film *Peter Pan*, a fantasy adventure released in 1953, based on the novel *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie (1911). The story follows Peter Pan and his pixie fairy Tinker Bell who take the Darling children from London to the faraway magical island of Neverland. There they meet Captain Hook, a pirate captain in charge of a crew aboard his ship, the Jolly Roger. Although he would have previously been looking for treasure, Hook is now on the search for Peter Pan to seek revenge. He is seeking revenge because Peter cut his hand off and fed it to a crocodile. Hook's anger because of this, is explained in a conversation between Hook and his sidekick Mr Smee in one of the film's first scenes.

Mr Smee: Why, captain, cutting your hand off was only a childish prank, you might say.

Captain Hook: Aye! But throwing it to the crocodile! That cursed beast liked the taste of me so well he's followed me ever since, licking his chops for the rest of me.

This dialogue indicates Hook's anger towards his acquired impairment and that it was Peter who caused it. The use of impairment and disability associated with villainy is explained by disability studies scholar Longmore (2003), who states:

Giving disability to villainous characters reflects and reinforces, albeit in an exaggerated fashion, three common prejudices against handicapped people: disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their "fate"; disabled people resent the nondisabled and would if they could destroy them. (p. 134)

As such, I would argue that Hook is embittered by his fate because from the beginning of the film and throughout, he is angry and resentful for acquiring his impairment from Peter. This continues to be how he is depicted throughout the film, which uses his impairment as a cause of his evilness. Consequently, the film depends on it as a narrative prosthesis for his villainy.

From the first scene that features Hook, his hook is emphasised in most shots, symbolising both his anger for becoming impaired and his vengeance toward Peter for causing his impairment. Hook's disability is situated within the medical model, locating it as an individual problem (Shakespeare, 2013). As Oliver (2013) asserts, many cultural images support the individual view of disability, an ideology the medical model implicated. Focusing on impairment as an individual problem, the medical model view of disability contributes to several common stereotypes in film representations, including the disabled and disfigured villains (Longmore, 2003; Norden, 1994b). Hook's impairment is depicted as a personal

problem from the moment he is introduced to the viewer, which defines who he is and turns him into a vengeful villain that continues as his narrative arc for the rest of the film. As Norden (1994) states, 'Disney animators, unfortunately, accentuate Hook's prosthesis at every turn; indeed, there are very few shots of the captain in which the hook is not conspicuous, as he often uses to mete out punishment or simply brandishes it as a threat' (p. 216). And as a result, it also provides a reason for his actions.

#### **5.4.1 'That cursed Peter Pan, making a fool out of me': No Empathy for Hook**

Captain Hook has more character depth than Scar. Rather than being a villainous character with one trait associated with evil, Hook is sometimes depicted as a goofy and frightened character in addition to being a violent and bitter villain. However, Hook remains cruel and cowardly throughout the story; he never learns any lessons and does not undergo significant change. Therefore, he is also a static character because we get to learn more about him in comparison to Scar. The juxtaposition of Hook's anger and violence towards others, particularly the children and Peter in Neverland, in contrast to the violence towards him, which is much more animated, slapstick and comedic, changes throughout the film. In doing so, the scenes quickly cut from Hook's violence towards others to his exaggerated fearful reactions repeatedly so he cannot be respected or taken seriously as a pirate captain. For instance, the appearance of the crocodile, which he is scared of, quickly diminishes any strong and commanding actions he carries out.

In Hook's first scene, his violence is exemplified when he shoots a shipmate after getting irritated by his singing. Moments later, tick-tock the crocodile – who was fed Hook's hand by Peter – approaches the ship.

In this scene, both Hook's and Mr Smee's eyes and bodies pulse in time with the tick-tock noise from the crocodile as it swims closer. Both diegetic and non-diegetic sounds are used simultaneously in these particular scenes. The sound of the crocodile's tick-tock, and Hook's reaction to the crocodile when he shrieks and shouts with fear are all diegetic sounds the characters on screen can hear. Meanwhile, the background music is a non-diegetic sound not heard by Hook, Mr Smee or the crocodile. Non-diegetic sounds, including background music, help to create an atmosphere and, in this case, adds elements of humour to the story. And subsequently, in this scene, Hook is rendered scared and helpless. Disability, consequently, becomes a plot device for humour and villainy because Hook is scared of the crocodile because it caused him to acquire his impairment, and he is fearful it might try to eat more of him.

There are numerous times in *Peter Pan* when there are acts of violence aimed at Hook. However, these scenes are animated overdramatically and comedically in comparison to the scenes where Hook is violent toward Peter. From this, I would argue that the film does not allow the audience to empathise with Hook because any empathy for his impairment, anger towards Peter or fear of the crocodile is masked with humour. For instance, when the crocodile approaches the ship, Hook shrieks and jumps into Mr Smee's arms. In this scene, he is animated with exaggerated emotions that ridicule him as a villain. This animation style draws similarities to visual tropes from Tex Avery-style cartoons, which exhibit high speed, rhythm and exaggeration in characters' emotions and actions, as well as endless amounts of gags (Bishko, 2007). Tex Avery created some prolific animated cartoon characters, including Daffy Duck and Bugs Bunny. Avery's animation style broke the strict realism style established by Walt Disney to encourage animators to stretch the boundaries of the medium (Dobson et al., 2019).



In contrast, Disney's style, particularly in the classic era, focused on the attempt to create realistic animation grounded in accurate movements from live models (Wasko, 2020). Hook's hyperbolic actions however, link to Avery's unique style because of his exaggerated fear juxtaposing his excessive violence. This relates to Garland-Thomson's (1997) discussion on cultural representations of disability, where she states, 'caricatures and stereotypical portrayals that depend more on gesture than complexity arise out of this gap between representation and life' (p. 11). And thus, such depictions perpetuate cultural stereotypes of disability.

Later in the film, Hook captures Tiger Lily to try and get Peter's attention. However, Peter is aware of his plan and continues to play tricks on Hook. After Hook realises, he finds Peter and climbs the rock behind him, attempting to capture or kill him. As Hook approaches the top of the rock, the shot focuses on his hook indicating its use as a symbol of violence. Hook puts his arm and hook in the air and attempts to hit Peter. But Wendy shouts to warn Peter Pan, and he quickly moves out of the way so that Hook's hook misses him, only touching his hat. This illustrates how dangerous and violent Hook is towards Peter. Moments later, Peter is flying around and tormenting Hook as he attempts to swipe at him with his sword and hook. A few moments later, they engage in a sword fight. Several point-of-view and close-up shots are used in this scene to emphasise Peter Pan's playful and mischievous behaviour compared to Hook's violence, portraying his vengeance and strong desire to kill Peter. There are several times during this scene when Peter torments Hook so that there is comic relief for the audience, such as when Peter pulls on Hook's moustache, which shows his face shaking, hair sticking up, and his eyes moving excessively. Doing this provides humour to the scene and reduces the violence and any empathy for Captain Hook.

The crocodile appears again in this scene when Peter and Hook are fighting. Hook is hanging on to the edge of the rock with only his hook (Figure 10) as the crocodile tries to eat him and tears off some of his clothes. Hook then falls from the rock into the mouth of the crocodile. As he struggles to get out of the crocodile's mouth, his clothes appear more torn, revealing some of his body and underwear. The animation style depicts him with high-speed and exaggerated reactions, providing the viewer with a source of humour. This struggle ends with Hook swimming away from the crocodile into the horizon as Peter cheers. And thus, Hook is again depicted as a fearful coward because any violence directed toward him has been masked with humour. Furthermore, this style of slapstick comedy and harmless fun directed at Hook ridicules him as a pirate captain and, as a result, also ridicules his acquired impairment. Consequently, the emphasis on Hook's physical impairment throughout the film renders him weak and consumed by his impairment.



*Figure 10 - Captain Hook hangs onto the edge of the cliff with his hook.*

After a close analysis of Captain Hook and the use of his physical impairment in *Peter Pan*, I would argue that it is used as a cause of his evilness. It is heavily relied on throughout the narrative to demonstrate Hook's role as the villain of the film and shows how he is seeking revenge because Peter caused him to become impaired. From this, disability is integral to the story of *Peter Pan* as well as Hook's storyline. It not only consumes his narrative but is also used in his name which shows the reliance upon disability as a plot device throughout the whole film. However, as I have suggested, Hook is also depicted as fearful which mocks his status as a pirate captain. Therefore, I believe that disability functions as a cause of Captain Hook's evilness but his impairment is also emphasised throughout the film alongside his cowardly actions so that the viewer cannot feel empathy towards him. Thus, disability is used for narrative purposes only, as suggested in the theory of narrative prosthesis.

### **5.5 Disney's First (and Only) Cyborg: John Silver**

Disney continued with the use of physical impairment and villainy in *Treasure Planet*, an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* (1883). Released in 2002, *Treasure Planet* is Disney's 43rd animated film which has been described as one of Disney's most expensive failures, mainly due to the unique blend of traditional 2-D animation and 3-D computer-generated animation (Mason, 2022) which was required to create the sci-fi world in which the film is set. Indeed, Disney changed the location of the original novel from a pirate sea adventure to outer space, making *Treasure Planet* a sci-fi adventure film. Due to this change, they also modified the main antagonist. The original *Treasure Island* features one of the most iconic pirates in fiction, Long John Silver, a cunning, opportunistic pirate with a missing left leg using a wooden crutch. In Disney's *Treasure Planet*, the main antagonist is named

John Silver, and he is now a cyborg with prosthetic enhancements added to fit the sci-fi setting. Because of this, John Silver was one of the hardest parts of the film to animate, with his human parts hand-drawn and his cyborg parts animated through computer-generated animation (Mason, 2022; Matheson, 2018). Although *Treasure Planet* was a box office flop, it has grown in reputation since its release and is now considered a Disney cult classic (Wasko, 2020).

In the depiction of John Silver, physical impairment and disability is represented in a more progressive way in comparison to Scar and Captain Hook. For the previous villains discussed, impairment has been used as a symbol of evil in the depiction of Scar and a cause of evil in the depiction of Captain Hook. Conversely, John Silver subverts the use of disability as evil because his character develops into an anti-villain, which is a villain with goals, traits and virtues that are more prominent than their villainous qualities. Although the depiction of John Silver is complex because he is a cyborg with enhanced prosthetics which potentially conforms to the medical model of disability and supercrip stereotype of disability, I believe that this representation, with the evolution into an anti-villain, provides an alternative representation of prosthetic empowerment. Furthermore, this depiction of disability provides a subversion of the common disability as evil trope, pointing to greater inclusion of disability and technology in the future.

### **5.5.1 'These gears have been tough getting used to': John Silver's Cyborg Identity and Impairment Effects**

The film follows a young teenager, Jim Hawkins, who is on the search for Treasure Planet. He journeys across the universe aboard the RLS Legacy ship with a crew of aliens, robots and a cyborg, John Silver. As described by Donna Haraway, a cyborg is a 'cybernetic organism, a hybrid of

machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (Haraway, 2016, p. 5). John Silver is a hybrid of human and machine whose right leg, arm, eye and ear all have cybernetic prosthetics. On board, he is the ship's cook and pirate captain who has dedicated his life to searching for Treasure Planet. When Jim first meets John Silver, he is shocked that he is a cyborg after being told by an alien back on his planet to 'beware the cyborg.' Jim is also not very forthcoming toward Silver when they meet. A two-shot is used to portray their interaction with one another as Silver offers his cyborg arm to Jim to shake when they first meet, but Jim is apprehensive because of what he has been previously told about cyborgs (Figure 11). However, after they are introduced to one another, Silver is welcoming and friendly, stating, 'don't be too put off by this hunk of hardware.' Silver's cyborg enhancements are then used as he cooks at high speed with his cyborg arm turning into a knife, scissors and torch. Later in the film, his arm also turns into a pistol, sword and clamp.



*Figure 11 - John Silver offers his cyborg arm to Jim.*

While cooking, Silver states, 'these gears have been tough getting used to, but they do come in mighty handy from time to time.' This reveals Silver's acknowledgement of the *reality* of living as a cyborg as he refers to his impairment effects which are the non-societal restrictions caused by the embodied experiences of living with an impairment (Thomas, 1999, 2019). This echoes the critique of Haraway's (1985) cyborg manifesto, which disability studies scholars claim fails to account for the reality of living with a body that is a hybrid of human and machine, specifically an impaired body (Reeve, 2012a). It also shows how Silver's prosthetics can be both enabling and disabling. Firstly, they enable him to function with the body parts that are missing or impaired, but they are also enhanced so he can perform tasks that he could not do before he became impaired. But on the other hand, Silver struggles with the effects of his impairments and cyborg prosthetics which are disabling for him and cause impairment effects.

During their journey to Treasure Planet, after their friendship has developed, Jim and Silver are sat together in a solar surfer they have just taken out for a ride. Silver lifts his prosthetic leg to lean it on a step as he sighs, showing his struggle with the mechanical prosthetic and the reality of his impairment effects. Morph, Silver's sidekick – the sci-fi version of a pirate's parrot – shapeshifts into a spanner so that Silver can tighten the screw on his mechanical leg. Jim watches and then asks, 'So, how'd that happen anyway?' Silver replies, 'You give up a few things chasing a dream.' Jim then asks if it was worth it, and Silver, laughing, replies, 'I'm hoping it is, Jimbo. I most surely am.' He says this as he moves closer to Jim, putting his arm around him similarly to how a father would. This displays the growth of their relationship during the journey to Treasure Planet and how it has begun developing into a father-son relationship.

This relationship depicts Silver as an encouraging role model and father figure for Jim, as Matheson (2018) states:

Silver becomes a positive role model for the boy. Replacing Jim's father, who was "the taking-off-and-never-coming-back-sort," the Sea Cook spends much of his screen time discouraging unruliness while developing in Jim the masculine vigor expected of boys in the late Victorian period. (p. 147)

Further, Fritz (2018) also describes how Silver observes Jim's vulnerability and chooses to take on the mentor role as he teaches Jim to do chores on the ship. From this, Jim grows into a responsible, hardworking man. Moreover, Silver's response about his impairments and how he gave up a few things to chase a dream implies that his dream is to find Treasure Planet and he became impaired in a previous attempt. As these are the only instances in the film where John Silver acknowledges his cyborg identity and talks about his impairments, the film does not use disability as a negative plot device or characterisation. Instead, it provides real-life portrayals of impairment and disability, particularly as Silver addresses his impairment effects. Therefore, it is a development from using impairment and disability in *The Lion King* and *Peter Pan*. Specifically, this is an evolution from Captain Hook - who is also a pirate captain - where his impairment consumes him, and his purpose and narrative revolve around his acquired disability. From this, I would argue that there is progress in how male villains with impairments are portrayed in Disney films that are less reliant on stereotypical tropes associating physical impairment with evil.

### **5.5.2 The Evolution of the Cyborg: Villain to Anti-Villain**

The audience is exposed to two different sides of John Silver. Initially, he is depicted as a cunning pirate villain plotting to steal the treasure with

his crew, and thus, he acts like a true villain with evil motives. A series of scenes show him talking to his crew in secret about the plans for the mutiny. However, at the same time, his friendship with Jim develops, and he becomes caring and responsible for Jim's growth into a young man. These opposing sides to Silver's character highlight his dual responsibility, which adds complexity and likeable attributes to his characterisation which are uncommon features for a Disney villain (Davis, 2014). His growth as a character and loyalties toward Jim shows how he evolves into an anti-villain, possessing more heroic qualities and traits than villainous ones. He not only subverts the character type of a villain but also departs from the classic pirate character as Matheson (2018) asserts, 'Silver's uncharacteristic fondness for the boy alters the presentation (and the character) of the pirate in *Treasure Planet*' (p. 148). This is particularly encouraging because of its association with disability. Silver's evolution into an anti-villain would have not been possible if the stereotype of disability and evil was perpetuated throughout the film.

Representations of cyborgs in popular culture, particularly in science fiction, have been identified as contributing to stereotypes of the evil cripple and supercrip. This is due to the depiction of an impaired cyborg which focuses on technology to cure and fix impairment. However, Silver is a more accurate reflection of living as a cyborg when he addresses his impairment effects. Indeed, Reeve (2012) claims that when disability is occasionally present and impairment and impairment effects are part of a character's story, the narrative 'presents a more realistic account of living as a cyborg, with all [their] problems, which is closer to the lived experience of disability and impairment than is usual with science fictions cyborgs' (p. 101). Furthermore, Silver is portrayed with a character arc which allows him to develop as a dynamic character which is a character that changes throughout the story (Nikolajeva, 2005). He is a dynamic



character because he changes from a cunning villain to a caring fatherly figure to Jim, progressing from a villain to an anti-villain. In addition, he is also a round character because he has a rich and compelling personality and possesses positive and negative traits. Nikolajeva (2005) suggests that for round characters, 'we [should] really get to know them well as the story progresses, but we cannot predict their behaviour' (p. 159) because they possess both good and bad traits. And this is extremely evident in the depiction of Silver. The audience gets to know him well as he demonstrates his positive traits and develops his relationship with Jim; however, during his evolution into an anti-villain, he still carries out villainous actions such as the mutiny, which are unpredictable. As such, he is fully developed but his behaviour is still unpredictable at times. Silver's change in character by the end of the film is more convincing because he shows signs of his caring side during his interactions with Jim.

Throughout the film, Jim and Silver's relationship is not straightforward, and tensions often rise. For instance, when Silver leads the mutiny to attack Jim and his friends and fight for the treasure. These actions show Silver's villainous side of his character. Furthermore, it is not until the film's climax that we see Silver's true colours manifest. When the crew find Treasure Planet, they are not there for long before it begins to self-destruct. At this moment, Silver is faced with a choice between wealth and freedom which is the one thing he had wished for all along or saving Jim. He chooses to save Jim which is a pivotal moment that indicates the change in Silver's character. Moments later, after Jim is saved by Silver, he constructs a solar surfer to save the Legacy and the rest of the crew, transporting them back to Planet Montessor. Once they are back on their planet, Jim finds Silver attempting to escape from the ship - so that he is not caught for his part in the mutiny. In return for saving him, Jim helps Silver escape from the ship and avoid prison for the

mutiny. Before they part ways, Silver encourages Jim to join him, but Jim states:

You know, when I got on this boat, I would've taken you up on that offer in a second, but, uh, I met this old cyborg, and he taught me that I could chart my own course. That's what I'm gonna do.

This shows Silver's impact on Jim as a father figure and friend as he has gained discipline and confidence, enabling him to develop into an independent young man (Fritz, 2018). As they are about to part ways, they hug and shed a tear, illustrating the strong bond they have formed with one another. Moreover, this shows how the relationship between Jim and John Silver has helped to break through Silver's villainous ways, subverting the traditional narrative of a villain. When Silver leaves the ship, he leaves Morph behind to become Jim's new companion and tosses Jim some jewels - the only ones taken from Treasure Planet. Silver states that they are for Jim's mother to rebuild the inn. This is another turning point for Silver's character because, at the start of the film, when Jim is warned to beware of a cyborg, his mother's inn is looted. During this scene, there are no explicit shots of John Silver; however, several shadows that are shown match his appearance. He is also accompanied by a crew of aliens who are similar in appearance to the crew that accompanied Silver onboard the Legacy. And therefore, by giving the treasure to Jim, Silver redeems himself for his wrongdoings. These actions emphasise the evolution from villain to anti-villain and the character development that Silver has undergone.

### **5.5.3 Another Supercrip or Prosthetic Empowerment? - John Silver, the Cyborg**

Representations in popular culture, specifically science fiction films, abound with disabled characters fixed by technology (Allan & Cheyne,

2020; Wälivaara, 2018a). Furthermore, fantastic settings often include disability as something to overcome or cure, reinforcing ableist and medical model views of disability. As Kathryn Allan (2013) argues:

When integrated into the able body, technology makes the human body better – an idealized version of itself. When technology is applied to the disabled body, however, it all too often is an attempt to cure or normalize what is deemed “wrong” with the body. Take the technology away and the disabled body’s supposed lack remains. (p. 10)

Curing impaired bodies can be further understood as ‘compulsory able-bodiedness’ (McRuer, 2006). Ria Cheyne (2013) applies this concept to science fiction texts to highlight how disability is removed by transforming or eliminating impaired bodies with technology. Therefore, many narratives find a way to fix the body to the expected level of normalcy (Davis, 1995). In addition, the fixed biotechnological body is often depicted with super-abilities. And indeed, many cultural representations rely upon enhancing the disabled body rather than portraying prosthetics as a replacement for a limb or technological aid (Fox, 2021; Schalk, 2016). Giving cyborgs enhanced abilities perpetuates this stereotype of disability as it gives an inaccurate representation of technological embodiment because, in the lives of many disabled people, technology is utilised to improve accessibility and reduce impairment effects. However, the dominant portrayal in cultural representations is the super-abilities or impossible enhancements that technology can bring to the body (Shakespeare, 2007).

John Silver is given super-abilities through his acquired impairments and enhanced prosthetics and, therefore, conforms to the supercrip stereotype of disability. However, I believe that the character

development of Silver and his reflection on his impairment effects provides a valuable depiction of the embodied experience of disability and technology, which moves beyond the simplistic stereotype of cure or super-ability. I draw upon Reeve's (2012) concept of the *iCrip* to emphasise my point here, which she describes as new ways of being that unsettle the binaries of disabled and non-disabled, and normal and abnormal. Through the figure of the *iCrip*, technology, embodiment and subjectivity should be viewed in new ways beyond fixing and curing. Because as Reeve (2012) suggests, many disabled people live with technology which subsequently challenges the binary division between disabled and non-disabled associated with impairment and technology.

I would describe John Silver as an example of Reeve's *iCrip*, an impaired cyborg. As she states, 'the ways in which impaired people incorporate their wheelchairs, prosthetics and canes into their corporeal and psychic sense of self produces new ways of being which are both (non)disabled and (ab)normal, which are *iCrip*' (Reeve, 2012, p. 106). She also emphasises the problems associated with living as a human and machine hybrid that the *iCrip* can experience. Silver, as an *iCrip*, demonstrates how he can incorporate prosthetics into his embodied self (as an impaired cyborg) and produce new ways of being whilst simultaneously experiencing problems (impairment effects) associated with living as a cyborg. Through this perspective, I argue that the film provides a reading of cyborgs and villains which develops our understanding of impairment and disability beyond the simplistic view of disability as evil, cured or supercrip.

In addition, Silver would be categorised as Schalk's (2006) 'superpowered supercrip narrative' because he 'has ability or "powers" that operate in direct relationship with or contrast to their disability' (p. 81). This is a dominant representation in superhero comics and films

(Grue, 2015). However, Schalk (2006) also proposes a nuanced framework for representations of supercrip so that scholars do not dismiss all supercrips as bad but interrogate the representation for how it adheres to the supercrip narratives she proposes. From this, although Silver can be categorised as a supercrip on the surface, a deeper analysis illustrates how characters can complicate the cyborg and supercrip stereotype. For Silver, although he conforms to aspects of a supercrip, I would argue that the evolution into an anti-villain and the references made to his impairment effects provide a more progressive representation of an impaired cyborg. As Goodley (2014) states, 'the disabled body has always demanded to be recognized not as an embodiment of lack, but of possibility.' (p. 62) So, can the representation of John Silver have the potential to promote prosthetic empowerment, not to overcome but to show an alternative embodiment of the intersection of human and machine? I certainly believe so.

## **5.6 Physical Impairment and Male Villains: Is there progression?**

In this chapter so far, I have discussed three male villains that have physical impairments. Firstly, I have argued that in *The Lion King*, Scar has a facial scar that is used as a symbol of his evilness. However, it is not used as a reason for his evilness but simply part of his characterisation as a villain. In addition, one of the hyenas, Scar's sidekick is an example of extended villainy. He also has characteristics associated with intellectual impairments and, as a result, can be categorised as a disempowered sidekick (Mintz, 2019; Schwartz et al., 2013). Secondly, Captain Hook's physical impairment - his missing limb with a hook - is used as a cause of his evilness. I have argued how this portrayal of disability and evil is more developed than Scar because Captain Hook is depicted as violent and evil but also scared and fearful. This illustrates progression in character development but continues to use

disability stereotypically. In addition, Hook's exaggerated reactions make it difficult to empathise with him because it is masked with humour. Finally, John Silver subverts the disability as evil trope as he develops into an anti-villain. In addition, he discusses his impairment effects which provide a more realistic portrayal of an impaired cyborg. Therefore, I believe there is a progression in Disney's treatment of physical impairment and villainy, providing more realistic representations of characters with complex and multi-dimensional experiences rather than being portrayed as two-dimensional characters consumed by their impairment and evilness. However, the content analysis findings show that there are villains in films after *Treasure Planet* (2002), namely Dr Calico in *Bolt* (2008) and Tamatoa in *Moana* (2016), where the male villain has a physical impairment and is not progressive like John Silver. This shows that despite progress in certain villains, Disney continues to perpetuate the use of physical impairment and villainy in their films.

In the next section, I discuss Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and the live-action retelling, *Maleficent* (2014), to show how the live-action film provides a backstory for Maleficent's traits relating to mental impairments. In doing so, this depicts disability as a social construct and develops Maleficent from a two-dimensional flat villain to a sympathetic character who experiences impairment, disability and social exclusion.

## **5.7 Female Villains and Madness**

From the content analysis, there was a clear distinction between male and female villains and their impairment types. All male villains were coded with a physical impairment, whereas female villains could be identified by their association with mental impairment. As I have previously discussed, Scar, Captain Hook and John Silver all have physical impairments that are used, in some way, to signify their villainy. On the other hand, several

female villains were coded because of their association with mental impairment and disability. These representations are less explicit, requiring interpretation through the character's appearance, actions, personality and mannerisms. The female villains identified in this way are all from older films, which support Bell's (1995) claim that Disney's classic films featured the quintessential female villain who is the 'vain, active, and wicked women of folklore' (p. 64). For this analysis, I discuss the female villain Maleficent as she not only demonstrates the association between mental impairment and villainy but also, her narrative is developed in the live-action retelling of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), *Maleficent* (2014), which provides a backstory for her wickedness. Therefore, in the following section, I briefly discuss her depiction in Disney's animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) where she appears as a flat character with one trait associated with evil. In addition, I also discuss the live-action retelling, *Maleficent*, where her story has been re-imagined providing a backstory for modern audiences. In doing so, Disney provides a productive and nuanced portrayal of mental health and disability as a social construct.

### **5.7.1 Mad Studies: Madness as a Social Construct**

This analysis follows Donaldson's (2002) departure from the *madness as rebellion* narrative to carry out alternative readings that consider the corporeal, lived experience of mental health conditions and impairment. As Johnson and Olson (2021) note, using mental health conditions as the justification for a villain's actions reinforces stereotypes of mental health problems as evil. Furthermore, in popular culture, women are often labelled with mental health problems. And in particular, there is an emphasis on madness. As a result, female villains have been consistently labelled mad, perpetuating the badness-as-madness stereotype

(Doberstein, 2019), which is also the case for the 4 female villains that were coded in the content analysis for this study.

Following the same trajectory of disability studies, mad studies views madness as a social construct and challenges the dominant medical and individual views of mental illness (Castrodale, 2015). And therefore, just as disabled people have claimed *disability* to demonstrate the social barriers impacting their lives, mad studies claim the term *mad* in the same way (Beresford, 2020). As a result, Donaldson (2002) proposed a feminist disability studies theory of mental illness. She states that the 'madness-as-feminist-rebellion metaphor might at first seem like a positive strategy for combating the stigma traditionally associated with mental illness' (p. 102) but it also has the potential to overlook the lived experience of disabled people who are disabled by mental health conditions. Indeed, theories tend to focus on the social causes and construction of madness but overlook the material conditions of the body. And therefore, Donaldson proposes a theory that includes the body by addressing the body as a material condition and mental illness as a physical impairment. This draws parallels to the criticisms that the social model of disability received because it did not address the lived experience (Shakespeare, 2006; Morris, 1991). As a result, theories such as impairment effects could be developed. She asserts that feminist disability studies theory of mental illness requires a focus on impairment and, therefore, a focus that is more aligned with the medical model rather than the social model as she states:

It is possible, in other words, to begin with the premise that mental illness is a neurobiological disorder and still remain committed to a feminist and a disability studies agenda - an agenda that fights discrimination, advocates for the rights of women, seeks to dismantle ideologies of oppression, critiques medical discourses of



mental illness, and demands equal access to social services and medical treatment - and it is important that feminists begin to think about mental illness in these medical and physical terms.

(Donaldson, 2002, p. 112)

This reconceptualization of mental illness allows health conditions to be addressed similarly to physical impairment. And therefore, it can be understood as a medical issue and an experience caused by society and alongside societal barriers. Therefore, as disability studies critique ableist discourses, a mad studies perspective critiques sanist discourses with the hope of uncovering the normalising discourses that contribute to the oppression of mad and disabled people. In cultural representations, mental health conditions are often portrayed as the character's flaw. This is often their main narrative arc which can often be traced back to one event. For example, in *Sleeping Beauty*, this is how Maleficent, the female villain, is portrayed. However, in the live-action retelling *Maleficent*, Maleficent's backstory involving the experience of physical impairment allows her to develop into a sympathetic character rather than continuing to be portrayed as a flat, wicked and evil villain.

### **5.7.2 Evil and Manipulative Without Reason: Female Villainy in *Sleeping Beauty***

Maleficent is the main antagonist in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Disney's 16<sup>th</sup> animated feature. The film is an adaptation of the 1697 Charles Perrault tale as well as the Brothers Grimm fairy tale also known as Little Briar-Rose, first published in 1812. *Sleeping Beauty* is also the last animated film based on a fairy tale that Walt Disney produced before his death in 1966. In the film, Maleficent plays a vital role in the film's plot. She first appears at Aurora's christening, angered that she was not invited, as she states, 'I really felt quite distressed at not receiving an invitation.'

Moments later, she places a curse on Aurora, who will die if she pricks her finger on a spinning wheel before her 16th birthday. The good fairies, Flora, Fauna and Merryweather, soften the curse so that instead of dying, Aurora will fall into a deep sleep with only true love's kiss able to break the spell. This is a common trope used in Disney animated fairy tales to emphasise heterosexual love (Garlen & Sandlin, 2017; Helm, 2022). This trope, however, is subverted in the live-action retelling with the removal of the romantic element and instead focuses on maternal love. As Helm (2022) asserts, in the live-action retelling, 'Disney removes the romantic emphasis that shaped previous narratives by exploring how Aurora can only be revived from her curse through Maleficent's maternal kiss, thus nurturing a familial relationship between Aurora and Maleficent in contrast to Aurora and Philip's romantic love' (p. 185). Indeed, this is just one of several changes that Disney makes in their live-action retelling of *Sleeping Beauty*.

In the animated version, Maleficent is depicted as a flat character, and her actions in the film's opening scene display her evil behaviours. Therefore, her overreaction of not being invited to the christening demonstrates her shallow and wicked nature. In addition, she is an elegant dark fairy with a cruel and devious personality. Maleficent's wild and erratic personality, combined with the dark and elegant design, turns her into a quintessential 'femme-fatale portrayed as vain, proud, and barren' (Donnelly, sec. 3). The backstory that is provided in the live-action retelling, however, is the key difference between the two films. And this development of Maleficent's narrative also contributes to the improvement of portraying disability as a social construct rather than an evil stereotype.

### **5.7.3 'A Fairy Creature Without Wings': Maleficent's Impairment and Cause of Evil in *Maleficent***

*Maleficent* (2014) is a live-action film based on *Sleeping Beauty* (1989) from the perspective of the female villain Maleficent. This type of live-action Disney film is called a *legacy retelling* by Rowe (2022), which she describes as a live-action film based on a classic Disney animated film that expands upon the original story and often focuses on a different perspective. Disney legacy retellings reframe the original story to provide a backstory from a different point in time. These live-action films contrast with *remakes* such as *The Lion King* (2019), which are simple recreations of the original animated film without adding anything new. Therefore, *Maleficent* is considered a legacy retelling because it focuses on the original story from the animated film, *Sleeping Beauty*, with the same characters that the audience is familiar with, but it also expands and develops new stories. Rowe (2022) asserts that Disney's legacy retellings aim to show how the company has grown and changed by respecting the original text and intentionally pointing to, removing or updating their flaws - often relating to outdated cultural representations. This is because many of the older Disney films have faced some criticism for their representations frequently associated with gender, race, queer or disability stereotypes. The legacy retellings, then, appear to respond to such critiques. Rowe (2022) identifies *Maleficent* as an update and critique on gender. And I would argue that the film also addresses and updates disability and mental health representations.

The live-action retelling of *Maleficent* is set earlier than *Sleeping Beauty* to provide the backstory of how Maleficent becomes the 'Mistress of Evil.' Maleficent is a young fairy living in the moors, which the human army is trying to destroy to take control of the land. Her parents have died, and she becomes close friends with Stefan, whom she falls in love

with. However, as years pass by, Stefan becomes intrigued by the human world. The king promises Stefan royal power if he kills Maleficent. For a short while, Maleficent acts as the protector and leader of the moors, and she successfully defends the lands from King Henry and his troops. This does not last for long, however, as Stefan poisons Maleficent and, through an act of greed, maims her wings. Stefan does not have the heart to kill her but does physically mutilate her. By taking Maleficent's wings, he physically disabled her. Leduc (2020) notes, 'Maleficent is violated because Stefan wants to bring her wings back as a trophy' (p. 167). From the perspective of Stefan and the rest of the humans attempting to take over the land, Maleficent is viewed as Other, and her wings are simply a prize to be won. The real villain, therefore, is not Maleficent but Stefan for carrying out this act of violence that 'destroys her autonomy and abilities' (Helm, p. 181).

Furthermore, by removing her wings, Stefan removes 'the very thing that makes Maleficent, Maleficent' (Leduc, 2020, p. 167). Since Maleficent does not move like other creatures because she is a fairy, she now has to learn to move like humans due to Stefan's greedy actions. Stefan has removed her primary source of mobility because without wings; she cannot fly. As Leduc (2020) stresses, 'A wheelchair, for example – like Maleficent's wings – can be an integral part of a disabled person's day-to-day life. It shapes how they navigate and see the world' (p. 167). Therefore, the removal of Maleficent's wings is a disabling act where she becomes physically impaired. Indeed, Donnelly (2016) notes that Maleficent requires a staff to walk, which gives the staff she uses in the original animated film purpose and function. In this act of maiming Maleficent, Stefan not only physically mutilates and disables Maleficent but also breaks her heart and gains power over the moors.

After Maleficent realises that Stefan's cruel act was so that he could become king and thus an act of greed and power, she becomes the 'Mistress of Evil.' This back story allows the audience to understand why Maleficent places a curse upon Aurora. In the original animated film, Maleficent appears at the christening and curses Aurora out of spite for not receiving an invite. However, in *Maleficent*, her rage and the spell she places on Aurora is justified - or at least has an explanation - as a desire to seek revenge on Stefan, as it has already been established that he is the story's true villain. Maleficent has not only become disabled but has also been betrayed by her first true love. This is described by Helm (2022) as an act which symbolises 'how the normative, able-bodied male character triumphs over the disabled female character' (pg. 81) and consequently, Maleficent is not only disempowered through her disability but also her gender.

Following this, Maleficent befriends Diaval, a raven who becomes her 'wings' to perform tasks she is unable to do in her non-normative state. Helm (2022) further claims that Maleficent's reliance on Diaval renders her helpless and incapable; therefore, disability is used to portray her as a victim rather than a villain. The relationship between Maleficent and Diaval develops as a friendship which is uncommon in portrayals involving a disabled character. More often, the character supporting the disabled person evokes pity or discomfort. Maleficent and Diaval, however, develop into true friends. And by the end of the film, they fly freely together; Maleficent has regained her wings and Diaval, who shapeshifts under her power, is in his true and preferred form of a raven (Donnelly, 2016).

#### **5.7.4 Disney's Adaptation of their Original Films: Improving the Representation of Disability?**

By providing the backstory of Maleficent, which involves the maiming of her wings, she is reimagined from a flat, evil villain to a misunderstood victim. This demonstrates Disney's ability to rewrite its fairy tale films for a modern audience and move beyond the original tales. In particular, it shows how progressive portrayals of disability can be created when stories are expanded upon and developed, even if Disney are not aware of it or making these narrative changes with this purpose in mind. By doing this, the example of *Maleficent* shows how physical impairment was the cause of Maleficent's wicked nature and her role as a villain. However, unlike the male villains I have discussed, whose physical impairments are signs of evil, the backstory in the live-action retelling of *Maleficent* provides more background and nuance. This allows her to be recognised as much more of a sympathetic character rather than an evil villain depicted in the original animated film *Sleeping Beauty* and male villains, Scar and Captain Hook.

#### **5.8 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how impairment and disability are used as signs of evil in male and female villains. Focusing on Scar, Captain Hook and John Silver, I argue that disability is used as a symbol of evil, cause of evil and subversion of evil. From this, I show that there is progress in the use of disability associated with villains with the example of John Silver as he subverts the disability as evil trope by developing into an anti-villain and addressing his impairment effects. This contributes to a more realistic representation of impairment and disability, as well as the portrayal of the cyborg. I have also discussed Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* and *Maleficent* to show how she appears in the original animated

film as a flat character who is evil, and there is no character depth to her. However, in Disney's retelling, which expands upon the *Sleeping Beauty* story, Maleficent is given a backstory which involves becoming physically impaired as her wings are maimed by the person she loves. I argue that this backstory turns *Maleficent* into a stronger disability narrative and develops Maleficent from a flat evil villain into a sympathetic character. This shows that for both male and female villains, there is a progression in the ways in which impairment and disability are portrayed.

In the next chapter, I look at three main antagonists whose narrative features impairment and disability. Firstly, I discuss impairment as a temporary curse in *Beauty and the Beast*. Secondly, I show how impairment manifests in *The Little Mermaid* through Ariel's transformation and the temporary muteness she experiences as part of the deal to become human. Although in both of these films, disability is an obstacle for the main character to overcome, when they do overcome it, they are transformed to their desired state of normalcy. And finally, I discuss Quasimodo, the main character in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, who is physically impaired and treated negatively because of this. Although he does not transform and is eventually accepted by society, he does not obtain a romantic happy ending. By analysing these three films, I show how the themes of otherness, exclusion and acceptance intertwine with disability throughout the films to emphasise the required state of normalcy.

## **6. Chapter Six - Otherness, Overcoming and Acceptance: Disability as a Temporary Problem and Cause of Social Exclusion in *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame***

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on three characters in films from Disney's Renaissance era: the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and Quasimodo from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996). These characters were chosen because the data from the content analysis shows that impairment and disability are used in 5 films as a punishment where the character overcomes their impairment to return to normal by the end of the film. I chose to further analyse the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* and Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* for this reason, as their disability is intertwined with an overcoming narrative. However, I also analyse Quasimodo from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to compare the treatment of his representation with the Beast's and Ariel's who both undergo a transformation, restore normalcy and obtain a romantic happy ending but Quasimodo does not. By analysing all three films, I demonstrate how aspects of impairment and disability are associated with themes of otherness and acceptance, and how impairment is used as a temporary plot device and cause of social exclusion.

In their films, the characters the Beast, Ariel and Quasimodo are all the main characters where they are depicted as outcasts in their society and a connection between their morals or behaviour and appearance is presented. I would argue that throughout these three films, these characters find their place in their society but to do so, they have had to overcome issues and obstacles that all relate to aspects of disability. In



particular, I focus on Mitchell & Snyder's (2000) concept of narrative prosthesis which they state occurs when there is an 'erasure of disability via a "quick fix" of an impaired physicality or intellect [which] removes an audience's need for concern or continuing vigilance' (p. 8). As such, it can be argued that impairment appears in the narratives of *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid* as an inconvenience that will disappear. This places emphasis on the need for the character to transform and return to the expected level of normalcy which allows them to gain acceptance, love, and a happy ending. I compare these two films with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* because Quasimodo does not transform back to a state of normalcy but he also does not get a romantic happy ending.

In *Beauty and the Beast*, a spell turns a prince into a beast as punishment, resulting in his temporary disablement, where physical impairment is depicted as monstrous. For Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, impairment is used as a temporary curse. However, she wilfully disables herself by accepting a deal to transform into a human, but in doing so, she has to give up her voice and becomes mute. In these two portrayals, disability is not shown as a part of the character's identity but simply as a plot device; they must overcome their impairment to return, in one way or another, to the status quo. For Quasimodo, his status as an outcast is integral to the story of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. His adopted father, the film's villain, locks him away because of his appearance and physical impairment, which depicts him as abnormal. There is progression, however, in that by the end of the film Quasimodo is accepted by his society and does not have to transform and overcome his physical impairment, as shown in the previous two films.

Quasimodo's acceptance by the end of the film is an adaptation created by Disney. In the original novel, Quasimodo dies - his skeleton is found alongside Esmeralda's in her grave. Disney changed the ending to

make it more suitable for their family-friendly audience. However, they did not choose to modify the ending in the same way as Ariel's happy ending in *The Little Mermaid*. In the original novel of *The Little Mermaid*, the little mermaid dies and turns into seafoam after she fails to make the prince fall in love with her. In contrast, Disney's adaptation provides the little mermaid with a romantic happy ending as she gets married to prince Eric. In both of these examples Disney makes significant changes to the ending of the original novels. Both characters, Quasimodo and Ariel, are given a happier ending than they receive in their literary texts as they do not end up dying but instead are accepted by society. The difference, however, is that Ariel is given a romantic happy ending. In addition, Ariel overcomes her temporary impairment of muteness before she attains her happy ending, but Quasimodo does not. As a result, Ariel is given a normative romantic relationship whereas Quasimodo is accepted by society but denied a romantic relationship. The only difference between Ariel and Quasimodo by the end of their films is their bodies and physical impairment. From this, I would argue that disability plays a vital role in these films and it promotes the idea that to obtain a romantic relationship, one must overcome their impairment and return to the expected level of normalcy.

The key themes that I have begun to discuss will be explored further in this chapter with comparisons made between the three Disney films and the original texts. In doing so, I explore the changes that were made by Disney in relation to impairment and disability and discuss how this impacts the representation of disability. Overall, I argue that there is progression. The first two films (*Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid*) depict disability as a reflection of the character's morals and is used as a plot device so that the character can return to normal and obtain a happy ending. However, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* moves

beyond this to remind the audience that physical impairment is not a reflection of a person's soul and in this instance, it is the non-disabled character who has too much power.

All three films explored in this chapter were released during the Disney Renaissance period (1989 - 1999), which is known for some of the most critically successful animated films released by the studio (Davis, 2006). Many films during this period followed the Revised Classic Disney Model (Wasko, 2020). As discussed in *Chapter Two: Literature Review on Disability Studies and Disney Studies*, the revised model features many of the same characteristics as the Classic Disney Model such as style, story, characters, and themes, but also contains alterations and updates to adjust to societal changes. This is particularly noticeable in the Disney princesses. Compared to the princesses from the Golden and Silver Ages, such as Snow White and Cinderella, Disney heroines of the Renaissance Era became more independent, empowered, and their actions and purpose focus less on romance (Mollet, 2020). Although their storyline still involves and ends with a romance, they are depicted as more independent, proactive and able to make their own decisions. This progression has been noted as an improvement in the representations of gender and race (Zarranz, 2007). And I would argue that it has also allowed disability narratives to develop. Specifically, Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* chooses to give up her voice in exchange for becoming human and, thus, temporarily disables herself. She then actively chooses to transform from a mermaid to a human to be part of a different world which requires conforming to compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006). Additionally, Belle in *Beauty and the Beast* falls in love with the Beast, demonstrating the Princess's evolution by subverting the traditional beauty expectations. Although the Beast transforms back to human at the end of the film, and therefore restores the level of normalcy

by conforming to the handsome prince archetype, Belle fell in love with the prince in his Beast and non-normative form.

## **6.2 Disability as Punishment: The Prince's Transformation into the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast***

I begin this chapter with a discussion on *Beauty and the Beast*, where disability can be viewed through the moral model of disability. This is when there is an association between impairment and an individual's behaviour. In this model, disability is considered a punishment from God, often because of an individual's sin or wrongdoing and is associated with an individual's moral values and behaviour (Olkin, 2022). Therefore, characters with bad morals are often depicted through their appearance, which frequently includes aspects of impairment. In contrast, characters with good morals are attractive, slim, and able-bodied. In Disney films, this is particularly noticeable, as Smith (2018) notes, 'whether directly stated or not, Disney is teaching lessons about good and evil as tied to bodily image' (p. 114). Indeed, the moral model of disability presents itself again in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* - which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter - where the villain Frollo emulates the moral model of disability in his attitude and treatment of Quasimodo. For *Beauty and the Beast*, disability manifests as a punishment and is used in the film to highlight the dichotomy of good and evil. Through the transformation of the Beast, I would argue that the film presents the concept of normalcy where the non-disabled body is favoured because it is only when the Beast is transformed back to the prince that he is rewarded with a happy ending.

Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) is based on the fairy tale *La Belle et la Bête*, originally published in 1740 by Gabrielle-Suzanna Bardot de Villeneuve and rewritten and abridged by Jeanne-Marie Leprince de

Beaumont in 1756. The animated feature is one of Disney's most successful, winning three Golden Globe Awards and the first animated feature to be nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards (1991). It is Beaumont's abridged version that Disney closely followed and is the most popular source text for other reprints and adaptations. Beaumont's tale aimed to attract a young female audience, teaching them 'ideas, norms, and values... considered worthy of emulation' (Zipes, 1981, p. 119). In both Villeneuve's and Beaumont's tales, Beauty is the heroine. She is hardworking and supports her family against adversity when her father, a wealthy merchant, loses his money and social privileges. Zipes states that the two versions offer 'didactic discourses on manners, morals, and social class' (1981, p. 122).

The Disney film begins by showing the prince refusing entry to a woman who appears as an elderly beggar woman. And it is within this opening scene that disability is presented as a punishment and can be viewed through the moral model of disability. Through illustrations on the castle's stained-glass windows, the narrator states how the prince is spoiled, selfish and unkind. A beggar woman appears at the castle's door, offering a rose in exchange for shelter. She appears with a crooked back and walking stick (Figure 12) and therefore impairment functions in this scene as a disguise because a moment later, the beggar woman reveals herself to the prince as the Enchantress. She disguises herself as an old, helpless woman to test the prince's heart. She warns the prince 'not be deceived by appearances, for beauty is found within,' but the prince turns her away again. She knocks on the door for a final time when the prince attempts to apologise but it is too late. The Enchantress casts a spell on the prince and the rest of the castle due to his selfishness and treatment of the woman's physical appearance. As a punishment, the prince is transformed into a 'hideous beast' who, as a result, isolates himself in his

castle because he is ashamed of his monstrous form. The rose that was offered to the prince now appears as an enchanted rose. It will bloom until his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. The spell will only be broken if the Beast can learn to love another and have them love him back before the last petal falls. If this happens, he will return to his human, normative and able-bodied form.



*Figure 12 - Old beggar woman with walking stick and rose portrayed in the stained glass window.*

The introductory scene in *Beauty and the Beast* provides the key message of 'beauty is found within' which is used throughout the film to promote the main theme of the association between appearance and moral values (Eilers, 2020). The binary of good and bad, and beautiful and unattractive are central to the film's plot because the Beast is punished for being selfish towards the old, unattractive beggar woman. The emphasis on the prince's behaviour as the reason for his transformation differs from the original Villeneuve tale. In this tale, a young prince loses his father and his mother leaves for war to defend the kingdom. As a consequence, he is left in the care of an evil fairy who tries to seduce and marry him when he becomes

an adult. When he gently refuses, the evil fairy casts a spell that transforms him into a beast (Smith, 2018). Disney's adaptation changed this to focus heavily on appearance and morality which I argue, can be read as a disability narrative where the Beast is punished and turned into a monstrous beast.

As claimed in Mitchell and Snyder's theory of narrative prosthesis, disability has been the object of representational treatment. From this, the presence of the disabled character in a narrative is used as a characterisation feature and a metaphoric device. In fairy tales, Schmiesing (2014) asserts that disability is often used to emphasise a character's lack of morals or as a punishment. She states, 'narratives not only often use physical ability or beauty to accentuate a character's moral virtues or other positive traits but also employ physical impairment as a mark that signifies evildoers or further ostracizes the marginalized' (Schmiesing, 2014, p. 1). Furthermore, 'the able-bodied protagonists are thus contrasted with antagonists who exhibit or are punished with impairment' (Schmiesing, 2014, p. 1). The transformation of the hero from monster to man can therefore be read as a reflection of the medical model of disability, reinforcing the conformity of able-bodiedness (Garland-Thomson, 1997). As Dula argues, in *Beauty and the Beast* tales, 'the physical impairment that dehumanizes him [the prince/beast] must be cured, or, in fairy-tale language, the fairy's magic spell that has enchanted and ostracised the monstrous man must be broken' (2020, p. 201). This echoes Siebers' (2008) claim that stories which project this narrative affirm the requirement for able-bodiedness and ability, which 'represses disability by representing the able body as normative in the definition of the human, and because human-interest stories usually require their hero to be human, they are obliged, when the focus is disability, to give an account of their protagonist's metamorphosis from

nonhuman to human being' (p. 111). In Disney's version of *Beauty and the Beast*, the punishment for the prince's bad morals is to be turned into an ugly beast. However, the message that beauty is found within contradicts itself at the film's end when the Beast transforms back to his human and non-disabled form. And thus, by overcoming disability, the film provides the prince with a happy ending and, as a result, conforms to the expectation of normalcy.

### **6.2.1 The Disneyfication of the Monster**

In Villeneuve's tale, the Beast is described as having a trunk similar to an elephant's and fish scales, portraying him as physically intimidating (Leduc, 2020). This presents the Beast to the reader as subhuman creating fear towards the non-normative body (Smith, 2018). In Disney's version, however, the Beast has no elephant trunk and has been given a cute, family-friendly appearance. The language used to describe the Beast throughout the film illustrates how the narrative still attempts to portray the Beast as monstrous however, focusing on his non-normative body. Nevertheless, the Disneyfication of the Beast makes him less sub-human in appearance than his literary counterparts. He is anthropomorphised, has silky fur, walks upright, wears clothes and feels strong emotions. This was likely to 'lessen potential trauma on audience members' (Smith, 2018, p. 119), making him child-friendly and likeable which ultimately makes it less intimidating for the non-disabled viewer (Smith, 2018) and suitable for Disney's target audience. Indeed, Disney's Beast relies on being cute, attempting to make him more of a victim than a monster (Resene, 2017). Because of this, there is more focus on his moral character than his appearance. This is evident as the film draws attention to the Beast's temper several times. For instance, when Belle's father is locked in the castle's prison, Belle attempts to save him. But moments later, the Beast appears angry at Belle. When he is in the frame, dark



lighting is used so that he appears in the shadows of the castle demonstrating the frightening nature the filmmakers were trying to project to the audience of the beast. In addition, the Beast roars and speaks angrily to emphasise his temper. Berberi & Berberi (2013) state 'an intent focus on the Beast's fiery temper prompts us to look past the uniqueness of the Beast's body and its predicament in favour of the human moral failure that predominates in its depiction' (p. 199). This shows how a focus on the Beast's temper is to remind the audience of the prince's wrongdoing which caused the curse and transformation into the beast.

Belle takes her father's place after the Beast takes him prisoner. However, as Smith (2018) points out, Belle decides to do this rather than being forced into it, as depicted in the original tale. Therefore, Belle shows authority and independence that the original Beauty lacked. Moreover, this is in keeping with several other Disney female protagonists who shift from damsels in distress to heroines (Davis, 2006). When Belle first sees the Beast's physical appearance, she is shocked, recoils and places her hand over her mouth. This reaction reinforces how the Beast is dangerous, abnormal and must be feared; attitudes that are promoted through the monstrous and sub-human stereotype (Smith, 2018). Indeed, the monstrous figure has been associated with disability studies scholars in the field. As Garland-Thomson (1997) states, 'the word monster — perhaps the earliest and most enduring name for a singular body — derives from the Latin *monstra*, meaning to warn, show, or sign, and which has given us the modern verb *demonstrate*' (p. 3). Disability has become synonymous with the monstrous body and exists in narratives through temporary impairments and often in contrast to the non-disabled body. In addition, Belle's reaction to the Beast is an example of Garland-Thomson's concept of the stare, which 'occurs when normative members

of society encounter people viewed as the other, monsters, and freaks. The stare is depicted as something fascinating and potentially horrifying that compels people to be unable to look away' (Alice & Ellis, 2021, sec. 4).

The film's villain, Gaston, subverts the expectations of beauty and appearance of a villain as he resembles the appearance of a classic Disney prince as described in the Revised Classic Disney Model: white, able-bodied, muscular (Wasko, 2020). The appearance of Gaston also adds emphasis to the Beast's non-normative appearance. From the start of the film, Gaston wants to marry Belle and tries everything possible to make this happen, including attempting to kill the Beast in the final scene. When Belle confesses her love for the Beast and not Gaston, who matches the expectations of a traditional Disney prince, this provides a subversion of the traditional expectations in a Disney narrative. However, as soon as Belle admits her true feelings, the Beast is transformed back into a human prince because the spell is broken. Smith (2018) argues that the film's happy ending 'allows the audience to find an easy way out of the film without coming face to face with the reality of disability' (p. 125). By overcoming his disability, the Beast is redeemed by transforming back into a prince and 'the Disney cannon is rewarded with one more non-disabled prince' (Smith, 2018, p. 125). Indeed, in all three versions of the tale discussed so far, the two original tales and the Disney adaptation, bodily difference and disability are narrated as monstrous and used as something that must be overcome through a transformation. The transformation removes physical impairment from the narrative so that the prince can return to the expected level of normalcy and live happily ever after. Although in Disney's version, Belle falls in love with the Beast in his monstrous form, he still transforms back to his normative human state. And by the end of the film, the happy ending is achieved when he

becomes the able-bodied hero, overcoming disability and restoring normalcy.

### **6.3 'I want to be where the people are': Ariel's Desire to be Human in *The Little Mermaid***

*The Little Mermaid*, released in 1989, was Disney's first fairy tale adaptation for 30 years following the release of *Sleeping Beauty* in 1959. The film is an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale of the same name, originally published in 1837. For the animated film, Disney made several changes to Andersen's tale, perhaps the most significant being the ending. The Disneyfication of this fairy tale provides a romantic happy ending for the little mermaid whom Disney named Ariel. However, the film also removes the violent and painful elements which the mermaid suffers during her transformation from mermaid to human in Andersen's tale. In Disney's version, Ariel is intrigued by the human world above. Ariel's father, King Triton, forbids her from contacting humans, but Ariel disobeys him on several occasions as she longs to be on land and become a human. The film follows Ariel's journey as the main protagonist, overcoming several obstacles to become a human. In doing so, Ariel not only disables herself by giving up her voice in exchange for becoming human, but she also rejects her state of normalcy to be transformed from mermaid into a human, conforming to compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006). In the section that follows, I discuss the key parts of Ariel's journey and illustrate how disability is used as a device to drive forward the film's plot.

Feminist/queer/crip scholars Sebring and Greenhill (2020) argue that the binary between the humans and merpeople presented in *The Little Mermaid* represents 'ideologies of compulsory able-bodiedness and the need for overcoming disability, as well as a strongly reinforced binary

of mermaid versus human' (p. 257). In their reading of *The Little Mermaid*, they argue that 'both humans and merpeople regard each other as problematically lacking in fundamental abilities' (Sebring & Greenhill, 2020, p. 257), creating a divide in which Ariel must choose between life under the sea with her family or on land as a human. Her choice of the human world and her transformation from mermaid to human conforms to the expectations of compulsory able-bodiedness required by the human world. In their concluding thoughts, Sebring and Greenhill state the importance of examining and deconstructing the binaries that exist between different bodies in popular culture through the lens of disability studies. And by doing so with *The Little Mermaid*, the film provides 'A perspective beyond a story of mermaids and humans, but a parallel tale of conforming and nonconforming bodies, and the experiences of living against the mainstream' (Sebring & Greenhill, 2020, p. 271). And I would argue that this is the case for all three films discussed in this chapter. Through the lens of disability studies, we can uncover how the narrative favours the able-bodied highlighting the ableist viewpoints and uses impairment frequently as a narrative device.

Ariel's strong desire to be human is demonstrated in her musical solo and I Want song, 'Part of Your World,' which she sings after an argument with her father for going to the surface again. An I Want song is a song in a Disney film that occurs often in the film's first act which is sung by the protagonist to express their motivation, longing or desire (Mittermeier, 2021). For Ariel, she is in her secret grotto, the only place she can be surrounded by the treasures she has acquired from the human world, when she states, 'Maybe he's right. Maybe there is something the matter with me. I just don't see how a world that makes such wonderful things can be bad.' This is the start of her I Want song and is a response to her father's strict rules to conform to the mermaid world but Ariel is

questioning her state of normalcy. Her father, King Triton, had asserted his authority and stated how humans are problematic, warning Ariel in the process. However, Ariel does not listen to this warning as she continues to sing:

Bet ya on land, they understand

Bet they don't reprimand their daughters.

Bright young women, sick of swimmin', ready to stand!

These lyrics demonstrate Ariel's strong desire to be human as she makes comparisons between her life as a mermaid who is sick of swimming and ready to stand as a human on land. Not only does Ariel want to be human but she believes that she will feel more accepted in the human world than under the sea. Nevertheless, Ariel is also urged by other characters, namely her sidekicks Sebastian and Flounder, to accept her life as a mermaid, but Ariel cannot do this. Her desire for the human world is too strong which is making her feel like an outcast in her society of merpeople and discontent existing under the sea. However, her wish to become human requires a transformation of her mermaid tail, which she refers to several times as she sings 'Part of Your World,' and gazes at her human treasures. This is particularly evident in these lines:

I wanna be where the people are, I wanna see, wanna see 'em  
dancin'

Walkin' around on those... What do you call 'em? Oh, feet.

Flippin' your fins you don't get too far

Legs are required for jumpin', dancin'

Ariel's strong desire for the human world, then, is not only to be part of a world that accepts her but also a desire for physical legs. She, therefore, imagines herself in a different form of embodiment. She knows she cannot exist in the human world with her mermaid tail. Therefore, she has to conform to the compulsory able-bodiedness required by the human world and reject her current state of normalcy (Davis, 1995; McRuer, 2006). As Sebring and Greenhill (2020) note, Ariel rejects her mermaid fin because it stops her from moving easily on land, but in doing so, she is seeking an able-bodied identity. Not only does Ariel not agree with the negativity that merpeople have towards humans, but she also willingly helps rescue a human, prince Eric, when he is caught in a shipwreck after another forbidden trip to the surface. After rescuing him, she becomes infatuated with him, increasing her desire to be part of the human world. From this, Ariel begins her romantic quest for a happy-ever-after, a theme that is synonymous with Disney fairy tale films (Mollet, 2020). As a result, the story is now concerned with Ariel's desire to be human for two reasons: to be part of a world that accepts her and to be in a romantic relationship with Eric which can only happen if she is part of the human world. This now presents able-bodied *and* heterosexual desires, which McRuer (2006) argues are intertwined and reinforce one another. And thus, as Ariel's desire to conform to compulsory able-bodiedness grows stronger, so does her desire for compulsory heterosexuality. Indeed, as Frasl notes, Ariel's 'changed body is a prerequisite for her functioning in a human and straight world' (2018, p. 346).

### **6.3.1 'What I want from you is... Your voice!': Ariel's Muteness, Impairment as Temporary Inconvenience**

After falling in love with prince Eric and rebelling against her father's overprotectiveness, Ariel is more determined than ever to become human. Because of this, she is willing to do anything possible to become

human including temporarily disabling herself by giving up her voice. Ursula, the film's sea witch and main villain, learns that Ariel is in love with a human and offers her a deal. The deal will enable Ariel to become human for three days and remain as one permanently if she can gain a true love kiss from prince Eric. Ursula states, 'The only way to get what you want is to turn human yourself,' before claiming that she can help 'unfortunate merfolk' like Ariel. Ursula then begins to sing her iconic villain song 'Poor Unfortunate Souls,' where she reveals that in return for her deal to make Ariel a human, she must give up her voice. Although Ariel is hesitant to begin with, Ursula reminds her that if she takes the deal and sacrifices her voice, her family, and her life as a mermaid, she will have her man. Ariel is also uncertain because she realises that without her voice, she will not be able to communicate. Ursula states clearly, however, that a woman's voice is not needed in the human world when she sings 'You'll have your looks, your pretty face and don't underestimate the importance of body language, ha!' The focus on Ariel's attractiveness as a woman is emphasised by Ursula to demonstrate that her looks are her greatest asset and the only thing that is needed to make prince Eric fall in love with her (Frasl, 2018).

After initial hesitation, Ariel agrees to the trade because her ultimate wish is to become human. This suggests that Ariel's temporary sacrifice of her voice is acceptable because her beauty and body language can be used to attract men. However, this temporary sacrifice also disables her. The film has already established through songs such as 'Part of Your World' that Ariel's voice is important to her. Yet she willingly signs the deal with Ursula demonstrating that her desire to be human and fall in love with Eric is worth temporary muteness. Ariel has been described as the first Disney princess to be proactive and independent as Davis (2006) argues, 'Ariel actively seeks adventures and works hard to achieve goals

she has set for herself, rather than simply responding to the crises with which she is presented' (p. 178). However, Ariel's loss of voice also represents her loss of agency. The empowering independence that she once had disappears when she attempts to function in the non-normative environment of the human world. She must adjust in two ways: walking on land with feet and legs for the first time and trying to communicate with prince Eric without a voice. In response to Ariel giving up her voice for a man, scholars have argued that it presents Ariel as a poor role model and that her sacrifice shows that women can get what they want by staying quiet (Orenstein, 2012; Wasko, 2020).

Furthermore, Sells (1995) argues that Ariel conforms to 'impossible ideals as she physically mutilates her own body by exchanging her fins for the mobility of human legs' and suggests what is 'even more disheartening [is that] she purchases this physical transformation with her voice' (p. 21). Moreover, Ariel's transformation into a human by losing her voice and ultimately choosing her destiny is progressive (Davis, 2006; Mollet, 2020). However, within this transformation, disability is used simply as a plot device and minor inconvenience that Ariel has to overcome.

Once Ariel is transformed into a human, Eric finds her on the shore and believes that Ariel is a random girl who has been caught in a shipwreck. Once he finds out that she cannot talk, he states how she cannot be the girl with the beautiful singing voice who saved his life earlier. However, as Davis (2006) points out, Ursula's advice to Ariel about not needing a voice does not make sense because Eric clearly remembers Ariel's voice when she saved him from the shipwreck. Eric does not instantly fall in love with Ariel because she has her 'looks and pretty face,' and he only recognises her as the woman he has fallen in love with once she regains her voice.



In the next scene, inside prince Eric's castle, Ariel attempts but fails to pass as normal within the human world. She is trying to participate in a society that is not constructed for mermaids. Even though she has undergone a physical transformation to fit in, the societal requirements are not as easy to conform to. This is exemplified in a scene at the dining table where Ariel brushes her hair with a fork and blows into a pipe thinking it is a musical instrument. Ariel has limited knowledge of the human world and as a result, how to act within it. She is copying what she has been taught under the sea by Scuttle, a charismatic seagull who is a self-proclaimed expert on human stuff. However, now that Ariel is part of the human world, it is clear that some of his expertise was not entirely accurate. Ariel's curiosity in this scene is used as humour for the audience. In this scene, the camera focuses on Ariel as she attempts to pass as normal, combing her hair with the fork before it pans to show the reactions of prince Eric, his father and the royal staff, who are looking in disbelief at Ariel's actions (Figure 13). When Ariel attempts to communicate, Prince Eric and his staff do not understand her and there is a cultural and linguistic barrier between herself and others. Instead of trying to accommodate her needs by providing more communication options, they continue to misunderstand her and, at times, simply ignore her. Charlotte M (2021) claims that Ariel is treated like a curiosity rather than a person asserting how the scene depicts Ariel as a new pet where her muteness is used as a funny or cute plot point. But as an actual speech impairment, Ariel requires alternative forms of communication. Leduc (2020) supports this by stating, 'Surely the little mermaid and her prince could have learned sign language, of a kind, or communication through gestures? ... In the Disney version, Ariel physically signs a contract with Ursula to give up her voice. *Couldn't she have written Prince Eric a note?*' (p. 128 – 129). This scene can be described as a cultural clash between the human world and the merpeople but it is also a

disabling event because Ariel with a temporary speech impairment faces barriers to communication.



*Figure 13 - Prince Eric and his father look shocked as Ariel brushes her hair with a fork.*

When prince Eric takes Ariel on a tour of his kingdom, there is a montage of memorable moments between them where they are enjoying a puppet show and dancing together in the town square. The final part of their time together is during a boat ride. At this point in the film, Ariel has not spoken a single word to Eric because she is still mute; however, this scene illustrates the development of Eric's feelings towards Ariel as he holds her hands and gazes into her eyes. This is encouraging as it shows Eric falling in love with Ariel when she is mute. However, Sebring and Greenhill (2020) argue that despite this brief moment as they look at each other, Eric's 'general obliviousness reinforces the idea that disability must be a fixed identity; it never occurs to the prince that the mermaid who entranced him could have lost her voice since they last saw each other' (p. 263). Indeed, it is unclear if Eric is aware that Ariel's muteness is temporary. He does not know about the deal Ariel has made with

Ursula, but he does think that Ariel has just survived a shipwreck. Therefore, he may believe it is a temporary impairment caused by that. Regardless, Eric shows a level of respect for mute Ariel.

Nevertheless, as a disabled woman, Ariel shows that disabled people can have experiences, romantic opportunities and relationships on the same level as non-disabled people. Although there are some encouraging scenes between Ariel and prince Eric when Ariel is disabled, ultimately, disability is used as a temporary inconvenience that must be overcome. Ariel's muteness is part of Ursula's deal to be transformed into a human; thus, it functions as a plot device to drive the film forward (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). In Andersen's original fairy tale, the little mermaid also loses her voice in exchange for the deal to become human, although it is a violent mutilation the mermaid endures. In both cases, the loss of the mermaid's voice is 'imperative to justify the text's interest in his or her exceptionality, and yet the text then must "rescue" the character from this disability lest it become too anomalous and disrupt the basic function of character identification' (Michell & Snyder, p. 307).

### **6.3.2 The Erasure of Pain in Disney's *The Little Mermaid***

One of the key differences between Disney's *The Little Mermaid* and Andersen's original tale is physical pain. Hastings (1993) argues that the Disneyfication of Andersen's tale 'homogenizes individual creations into a simplistic narrative sameness but eliminates the moral complexities of the original text' (p. 90). As discussed throughout this thesis, the process of Disneyfication has become the model for Disney fairy tale adaptations (Zipes, 1995). For Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, the erasure of pain provides Ariel with her wish of becoming human without true sacrifice, simplifying the consequences of transformation. However, it is argued that the treatment of the little mermaid in Andersen's tale is ableist

because she experiences extreme pain when she walks like a human (Sebring & Greenhill, 2020; Yamato, 2017). Andersen's mermaid is driven by her desire for a human soul and sacrifices her family, life and body for the possibility of acquiring one. Her tongue is cut out by a sea witch, making her mute, and with every step she takes, she feels like she is walking on sharp knives. This contrasts with Ariel's decision to transform which is from a strong desire to be human but is free from pain. Although Ariel wilfully disables herself when she accepts Ursula's deal, no physical pain is involved.

Because all elements of pain have been erased through magical elements and the Disneyfication of the original text, this also erases the moral messages that are prominent in Andersen's tale. As Leduc (2020) asserts, 'suddenly we have two versions of the tale: one in which the disability is vanished and the abled body reigns supreme, and another in which the disability is permanent and leads to grief and suffering' (p. 129). From this stark contrast, she questions, 'where is the space for disability as a simple fact of life in a scenario like this?' (Leduc, 2020, p. 129). Indeed, there are two different versions of the story and two different depictions of disability. In both instances, disability is not part of the character's identity but used for moral consequences or as an inconvenience to overcome. Hastings (1993) asserts that children who read Andersen's tale will learn that 'desires have consequences that may be painful, where wanting something badly enough to suffer for it need not make it happen,' but in contrast, children who watch Disney's film 'experiences a world in which bad things only happen because of bad people, where desire is always fulfilled' (p. 90). The Disneyfication of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, then, simplifies the moral implications of desire and, consequently, the moral model of disability where those who

act or appear good are rewarded and those who are bad are impaired or killed.

In Andersen's tale, the little mermaid sacrifices all aspects of her life and identity for a human prince. Firstly, her tongue is cut out by a sea witch in exchange for becoming human so that she can try and convince the prince to fall in love with her. She must do this to remain human and receive an immortal soul. If the prince marries someone else, she will become sea foam. Although the little mermaid finds the prince and attempts to enchant him (without a voice), she is described as the prince's 'little foundling.' This depicts the mermaid as a child or sibling in relation to the prince; she is viewed as asexual rather than a potential romantic partner (Leduc, 2020; Yenika-Agbaw, 2011). Zipes (2011) states Andersen's 'perspectives focus more on the torture and suffering that a member of the dominated class must undergo to establish her true nobility' (p. 96). Andersen's mermaid not only experiences muteness as part of the deal of becoming human but also experiences physical pain from the transformation she has gone through to become human.

In contrast to Andersen's tale, Disney's version utilises romantic fulfilment as a key theme in the story – as it does in all Disney Princess films that follow the Classic and Revised Classic Disney Models (Mollet, 2020; Wasko, 2020), with the exception of *Frozen*, which is discussed in the next chapter, *From Exclusion to Affirmation: Disability as a Magical Power in Wreck-It Ralph and Frozen*. Sells (1995) notes that 'embedded within this classic narrative about an adolescent girl's coming of age is a very contemporary story about the costs, pleasures, and dangers of women's access to the "human world"' (p. 176). By the end of Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel has 'her legs, regains her voice and gets her prince for a romantic happy ending. This contrasts with the original mermaid, who dies with none of those things' (Leduc, 2020, p. 129). The

ending of *The Little Mermaid* follows a similar transformation in *Beauty and the Beast*, illustrating conformity to normalcy and overcoming temporary impairment. This is not the case for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which is discussed in the next section as Quasimodo does not transform but remains in his non-normative state. However, this has implications as he is not given a romantic happy ending as presented in *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

#### **6.4 A Tale of a Man and a Monster: Physical Impairment, Normalcy and Otherness in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame***

*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is set in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Paris and centres around Quasimodo, the film's main protagonist. He is physically impaired and locked away in the bell tower because of his appearance. The film is Disney's 34<sup>th</sup> animated feature, released in 1996. A change from the traditional fairy tale adaptation during Disney's Renaissance period, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is an adaptation of Victor Hugo's 1831 novel of the same name. The French Gothic novel has dark and heavy themes which end in tragedy for many of the primary characters. Because of this, Disney made several changes to the story to make it suitable for families and young children. One of the directors, Kirk Wise, stated:

We knew it would be a challenge to stay true to the material whilst still giving it the requisite amount of fantasy and fun most people would expect from a Disney animated feature. We were not going to end it the way the book ended, with everybody dead. (Thompson & Karger, 1996, para. 4)

Indeed, several key elements of the original novel were changed for the animated feature, including Quasimodo's deafness. In Disney's animated version, Quasimodo is not deaf and is capable of fluent communication, whereas, in Hugo's novel, Quasimodo became deaf after years of living in

the bell tower. Through the Disneyfication of the novel, the tragic ending is also altered, transforming it into a happy one. The changes made to Hugo's text by Disney have been described as 'confusing the comic with the tragic' (Ward, 2002, p. 66), asserting that the story was not meant to be fun or cute. In the literary text, Esmeralda is hanged for Frollo's wrongdoings, and Quasimodo pushes Frollo to his death in anger over the death of Esmeralda, whom he loves. Quasimodo vanishes only for his skeleton to be found years later in the grave alongside Esmeralda (Ward, 2002). Although Disney made drastic changes to elements throughout the film and particularly the ending, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is one of the darkest animated features the studio has created to date (Borthaiser, 2011). However, although the film added extra elements such as musical numbers, singing gargoyles and a happy ending suitable for Disney's family-friendly brand, there are several key elements and themes of the original text which feature, however loosely, for narrative purposes. Therefore, Disney's version still features dark themes such as death, religion, corruption, violence and sexual desire that are prominent in the original text (Ward, 2002). These contribute to the film's overall message on how to treat others as human beings, regardless of religious background, race and ethnicity, gender or disability. Moreover, this is something that children and adults can potentially take away and learn from the film. However, because of these dark themes, the film has also been of critical attention because of its treatment of ethnicity (Lacroix, 2004) and ableism (Norden, 2013; Steinmetz, 2022).

Furthermore, for the representation of disability, this is a significant film as it was Disney's first attempt to feature a physically disabled hero and main protagonist. However, for the disabled community, it was and still is much more than just a family film for entertainment purposes. As Norden (2013) argues, 'Yes, it's a movie, but it's so much more than that;

for disabled people, movies such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* are harmful and divisive expressions that reinforce negative beliefs that can lead to further discrimination' (p. 173). One reason for this is Disney's cultural force (Henry. A. Giroux & Pollock, 2010), which contributes to society's understanding and response to disability. The film has also been criticised for oversimplifying the original novel regarding its representation of disability (Steinmetz, 2022). In addition, Norden (2013) notes how Disney did not work with disability consultants during the film's pre-production and how the film's release saw a rise in violence against people with scoliosis in the United Kingdom (Norden, 2013). Although Quasimodo is a good character, this demonstrates the real-life impact that films like *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* can have on the perception of disability and, consequently, the treatment of disabled people. As Watson (2020) and Pritchard (2019) have argued through the depiction of dwarfism in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the portrayal of disability in Disney animated films has real-life impacts on disabled people.

#### **6.4.1 'How can I protect you, boy, unless you always stay in here': Frollo's Wicked Treatment Towards Quasimodo**

Through the social model of disability, people with impairments become disabled from barriers in society including discriminatory attitudes and treatment from others (Oliver, 2013). This treatment is often reinforced by stereotypes of disability which are ableist viewpoints causing oppression towards people with impairments. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Quasimodo endures negative treatment from his adopted father Frollo throughout the film, from the moment he is found on the steps of the cathedral as a baby to the present day where he is locked away in the bell tower as a young man. This treatment reflects Frollo's ableist view of people with impairments and specifically his negative judgement of Quasimodo. Frollo is the villain of the film which allows the narrative to



assert how his treatment towards Quasimodo is bad and thus, his actions can be understood as a villainous act. In addition, Quasimodo's society is also disabling because many of the local people judge Quasimodo by his looks and follow orders from Frollo. As a result, Quasimodo becomes a victim of social exclusion. Therefore, Frollo and the rest of society reinforce the expectation of normalcy, and since they are villainous characters, I would argue that the film attempts to condemn their actions.

The film begins with Clopin, the leader of the Romani people, performing a puppet show for children on the streets of Paris. Then, through his narration and the song 'The Bells of Notre Dame,' he tells the story of the mysterious bell ringer named Quasimodo. This scene provides the backstory to Quasimodo and how he became isolated in the bell tower. Next, the film cuts to the night when Frollo becomes Quasimodo's adopted father. At the same time, Clopin introduces one of the film's main themes when he states, 'It is a tale of the monster and the man.' Then, Clopin pulls the curtain on the play; the screen fades to black and transitions to the day Frollo found Quasimodo on the steps of Notre Dame 20 years ago.

Three Romani people are attempting to enter Paris next to the Notre Dame cathedral on this day but they are quickly stopped by Frollo's guards, who have been summoned to surround and arrest them. It is later made clear that Frollo wants to eliminate all Romani people from the city. A Romani woman escapes with a baby in her arms, but Frollo, on his horse, soon catches up with her at the cathedral's steps. He snatches the blanket from her arms and kicks her down onto the steps, where she dies instantly. As the baby cries, Frollo opens the blanket and states, 'A baby? [gasps] A monster!' after seeing Quasimodo's face and body. He then attempts to get rid of the baby down a nearby well but is stopped by the archdeacon who warns Frollo of his religious morals. However, Frollo

explains, 'This is an unholy demon. I'm sending it back to hell, where it belongs.' This establishes Frollo's ableist view on impairment labelling Quasimodo as a monstrous demon. His actions demonstrate his belief that disabled people should be killed, depicting the treatment of disability through the moral model. Indeed, Smith (2018) notes that Frollo 'promulgates the moral model by terming Quasimodo an "unholy demon" that should be drowned and "sent back to hell" due to his physicality' (pp. 113 – 114). And as the story develops, Frollo's view of Quasimodo's impairment does not change but instead becomes the cause of Quasimodo's segregation.

The archdeacon tells Frollo that he must care for the child and raise it as his own otherwise he would be punished for killing the innocent mother of the baby. Frollo, a profoundly religious man, reluctantly gives in but proposes that the baby should live in the bell tower where he can be locked away so no one else can see him. This provides the background to Quasimodo's isolation in the bell tower revealing how it is due to Frollo's negative attitude towards his physical impairment which causes his disablement. This is also the start of the negative attitude and treatment toward Quasimodo's physical impairment, which continues throughout most of the film. The film then cuts back to Clopin, who explains that 'Frollo gave the child a cruel name, a name that means half-formed, Quasimodo,' demonstrating that the narrator condemns the meaning of his name. This scene provides the backstory of Quasimodo's harmful treatment, including Frollo's labelling of him as a monster and demon as well as the explanation of his name. In the original novel, it is stated that Quasimodo was given his name because he was abandoned on Quasimodo Sunday - an Italian holiday that takes place on the Sunday that follows Easter (J, 2014). The original definition and Latin origin of the word quasi means 'almost' which suggests that the name was chosen for

these two reasons: to refer to the day that Quasimodo was found as a baby and his almost-complete appearance. As a result, Quasimodo becomes one of several disabled characters that are named after their impairment including characters I have previously discussed, Scar and Captain Hook. This reveals how there is a reliance upon associating a character's name with their impairment and thus, instead of their impairment being part of their identity, it becomes their defining feature.

On the other hand, Director Kirk Wise states how the film 'promotes positive values, compassion, understanding of people different than yourself' and describes Quasimodo as a 'shy, unsure young man ashamed of his own face, rather than a monster' (Thompson & Karger, 1996). However, he is explicitly referred to as a monster throughout the film by Frollo and the citizens of Notre Dame who attend the Festival of Fools. Indeed, Norden (2013) argues this point by stating, 'the movie appears to critique the view that "different" people should be kept separate and isolated, yet simultaneously perpetuates it and, worse, wallows in it' (p. 164). As such, I would argue against Norden's point made here because although the film highlights the negative treatment Quasimodo receives because of his physical impairment, by the film's end, Quasimodo is accepted by his society which allows the audience to learn that the treatment he previously faced was negative. In doing so, I believe that *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* provides a narrative on how *not* to treat those who are different through the film's plot points. And by the end of the film, when Quasimodo has been accepted by others, the film projects the message that physical impairment is not always a reflection of a person.

The wicked treatment of Quasimodo by Frollo is demonstrated during the first part of the musical number 'Out There.' After years of watching the Festival of Fool from the bell tower, Quasimodo hopes to

attend so that he can be part of society. His excitement at the idea of going to the festival, however, is quickly diminished when Frollo comes to the bell tower for lunch and makes it clear to Quasimodo that the festival is not for him to attend. Frollo then begins to sing the first part of the musical number which is titled 'Stay in Here.' As he sings, he explains to Quasimodo, 'the world is cruel, the world is wicked. It's I alone whom you can trust in this whole city. I am your only friend.' He continues to sing, 'I who keep you, teach you, feed you, dress you. I who look upon you without fear. How can I protect you, boy, unless you always stay in here, away in here.' Although Frollo claims his action of keeping Quasimodo in the bell tower is to protect him, the following lines emphasise Frollo's villainous traits as he reminds Quasimodo of what he has taught him:

Frollo: You are deformed

Quasimodo: (I am deformed)

Frollo: And you are ugly

Quasimodo: (And I am ugly)

From this, it is evident that over the years of living in isolation, Frollo has persistently told Quasimodo that he is a monster, conditioning him to think this way about himself. It is particularly poignant in this part of the song that Quasimodo is naïve and does not know anything beyond living in the bell tower, conforming to Frollo's strict rules, and believing that he is an ugly monster whom no one will like. By showing the treatment of Quasimodo in this way, the film is denouncing the behaviour rather than praising it which provides a critical commentary on how society disables people (Smith, 2018). Furthermore, because Frollo is the villain, the audience can understand how Frollo's actions and language used toward Quasimodo are wrong and recognise that it is bad. This also allows the

audience the opportunity to feel empathy for Quasimodo as they are able to understand his experience and see, from his point of view, how he is mistreated. This is encouraging because sympathy is often sympathy that is promoted in relation to disabled characters where the narrative wants us to pity the character with an impairment. As Smith (2018) states, 'as an "object of pity," a person with a disability is viewed as being in need of care and sympathy' (p. 112). Therefore, I would argue that the film provides a more didactic representation of disability that moves beyond stereotypical depictions of sympathy and pity to a portrayal provoking empathy where the audience can understand the disabled person's problems from their point of view. By doing this, the focus shifts from the disabled person as the problem to the non-disabled person who is mistreating the disabled person.

#### **6.4.2 'Just one day and then I swear I'll be content': Quasimodo's Wish for Acceptance**

Once Frollo leaves the tower, Quasimodo watches the crowd below as he sings the main part of 'Out There', described as Quasimodo's 'I Want' song. For Quasimodo, 'Out There' communicates his strong desire for acceptance, freedom, friendship and community. In the musical number, he sings, 'all my life I wonder how it feels to pass a day, not above them but part of them.' The final shot used in the musical scene zooms out from Quasimodo at the top of the bell tower and pans to show the surrounding city landscape of Paris. Then, the camera zooms in towards the townspeople below, whom Quasimodo continues to sing about as he wishes to be amongst them. The song's lyrics indicate Quasimodo's strong desire to be part of society, even if it is just for one day. The lyrics also help connect the audience to Quasimodo's story through empathy as we are able to understand his experience from his point of view, something

which is often missing from disability narratives. This is illustrated further when Quasimodo sings:

Just one day and then I swear I'll be content

With my share, won't resent, won't despair

Old and bent, I won't care

I'll have spent one day, out there

These lyrics demonstrate Quasimodo's strong determination to spend time out of the bell tower and as part of normal society. This is not only a desire to be out of the tower but also to be accepted by others.

After encouragement from his gargoyle friends, Victor, Laverne and Hugo – who are figments of his imagination – he sneaks out of the cathedral to attend the Festival of Fools and arrives hiding behind a cape. The song 'Topsy Turvy' sets the scene for the festival, which aims to crown the ugliest fool. Quasimodo quickly finds himself on stage alongside other fools wearing masks for the competition. When Esmeralda chooses him as the ugliest fool, the crowd soon realise that he is not wearing a mask as someone in the crowd shouts, 'That's not a mask, that's his face!' Although the crowd begin to cheer when he is crowned the King of Fools, they quickly turn on him by throwing rotten fruit and tying him down to a turntable. Esmeralda is the only person to help him after disobeying Frollo's orders. Frollo, who is watching, wants to teach Quasimodo a lesson for sneaking out of the bell tower. However, Esmeralda frees Quasimodo and lectures Frollo on the treatment of Quasimodo. She states, 'You mistreat this poor boy the same way you mistreat my people. You speak of justice, yet you are cruel to those who most need your help.' Esmeralda's response describes the oppression that she and Quasimodo both face. She is a Romani woman labelled a 'gypsy'

(sic) by Frollo and continues to be negatively treated because of her ethnicity. In defending Quasimodo, she illustrates the similarities between their identities as marginalised, oppressed and other. For the viewer, this provides a didactic dialogue situating disability alongside race/ethnicity as an oppressed group that faces discrimination.

Esmeralda's help toward Quasimodo angers Frollo resulting in him sending his guards to capture Esmeralda. The treatment that Quasimodo endures by Frollo and the crowd at the Festival of Fools is due to negative attitudes towards his non-normative body. The rest of society adopts the negative attitude of Frollo, which makes Quasimodo's society disabling. No one other than Esmeralda is accepting or positive towards Quasimodo. As a result, the encounter between Quasimodo and the normative society presents an example of Quayson's (2007) aesthetic nervousness where 'the dominant protocols of representation within the literary text are short-circuited in relation to disability' (p. 15). Quayson emphasises how this can be detected across levels of the text, in the connection between texts and readers and the relationships of disabled and nondisabled characters. The relationship between the disabled and non-disabled characters in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* during the Festival of Fools presents this idea of aesthetic nervousness. Other than Esmeralda, the non-disabled citizen's ability to empathise with Quasimodo is short-circuited by their feelings of disgust, fear and pity, which is a reaction to his physical disability (Quayson, 2007). In this way, the film highlights and condemns society's treatment of Quasimodo's physical impairment.

### **6.4.3 Quasimodo's Gargoyles: Imaginary Friends and Personal Dialogue on Disability**

The gargoyles, Victor, Laverne and Hugo, play a key role in portraying Quasimodo as a disabled character. They are shown throughout the film as Quasimodo's sidekicks and function similarly to other Disney sidekicks, such as Sebastian from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), Pascal from *Tangled* (2010), and Timon and Pumba from *The Lion King* (1994). The difference, however, is that unlike other sidekicks in Disney films who exist within the society of their film and interact and speak to characters, the gargoyles in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* only speak to Quasimodo because they are created by his imagination. By using the gargoyles as imaginary friends for Quasimodo, the filmmakers create a valuable personal dialogue and commentary on disability from his perspective which adds empathy and complexity to his character. We can assume that what they say throughout the film is actually Quasimodo's thoughts. By doing this, the audience is given an insight into Quasimodo's opinions on his appearance, disability and desire for social interaction, which would be difficult to provide through dialogue with any other character in the film. The gargoyles also provide comic relief throughout the film and give Quasimodo advice and encouragement during key parts, including disobeying Frollo, going to the Festival of Fools, and seeking love from Esmeralda.

Nevertheless, using sidekicks as imaginary friends with a disabled character associates Quasimodo with child-like qualities, a disability stereotype often perpetuated in film (Nelson, 1994). Sidekicks that feature in other Disney animated films exist within the setting of the film and can interact and talk to other characters within the parameters of such films. Furthermore, the Disneyfication of Hugo's Quasimodo perpetuates disability clichés, such as depicting Quasimodo as



'emotionally stunted' (Norden, 2013, pp. 168–169). Despite being an adult, he remains a child at heart. And thus, he is not only infantilised but also desexualised. Indeed, there are several instances in the film where characters, including Esmeralda and Frollo, refer to Quasimodo as a boy rather than a man. For instance, Frollo calls him a 'poor, misshapen child.' In addition, Harnick (2001) claims that Disney infantilised Quasimodo's appearance so that he appears as a prepubescent boy rather than a 20-year-old man. This is also echoed by Norden (2013), who describes Disney's Quasimodo as an 'awkward child with self-esteem problems' (p. 167). And thus, the use of imaginary friends as sidekicks also contributes to the depiction of Quasimodo as a child rather than a man.

#### **6.4.4 'Three Cheers for Quasimodo': Acceptance and a Happy Ending for Quasimodo**

The gargoyles do provide helpful dialogue which projects Quasimodo's true feelings about himself, his desire to be part of the wider world and his love for Esmeralda. The commentary between Quasimodo and the gargoyles helps Quasimodo's self-confidence, allowing him to carry out such actions as attending the festival of fools, talking to Esmeralda and helping Esmeralda and Phoebus. At the film's climax, Frollo is about to kill Quasimodo as he stands behind him with a sword behind his back, as Quasimodo tends to Esmeralda, who has been knocked unconscious. Quasimodo uses his strength to push Frollo away and states, 'No, you listen! All my life, you have told me the world is a dark, cruel place. But now I see that the only thing dark and cruel about it is people like you.' This is a pivotal moment as Quasimodo now recognises that Frollo's treatment has been wrong and that his treatment towards him caused his exclusion rather than his own physical impairment. Esmeralda then wakes up, and Quasimodo grabs her to run away from Frollo. When Frollo finds them, he states, 'I should have known you'd risk your life to save that

gypsy witch, just as your own mother tried to save you.' At this moment, Quasimodo is surprised because this is the first time Frollo has talked about his mother. Frollo then says, 'Now I'm going to do what I should have done 20 years ago!' and attempts to kill Quasimodo. In doing so, he slips off the side of the cathedral before falling to his death. Quasimodo also falls but is caught by Phoebus.

After Frollo is defeated, it is clear that it was Frollo's opinion of Quasimodo that caused Quasimodo's social exclusion not only in the bell tower but also in the attitudes of the citizens of Paris as Quasimodo is now accepted into society. Esmeralda and Phoebus are standing on Notre Dame's steps as Esmeralda offers her hand to Quasimodo. He appears from the dark shadows into light as the townspeople look at him with nervous and apprehensive looks. Then, a young child approaches him, touches his face, and embraces him (Figure 14). This interaction is a crucial part of the film which will resonate with children by showing them not to judge by appearance and to be compassionate towards others regardless of differences. Indeed, it provides a mirror for the young audience where they can see themselves reflected and are reminded how to treat those who are different (Sims Bishop, 1990). In addition, this also emphasises the importance of exposing children to Disney films when they depict meaningful messages like this. As Giroux and Pollock (2010) claim 'Disney's animated films operate on many registers, but one of the most persuasive is their role as 'teaching machines'' (p. 91).



*Figure 14 - A young child embraces Quasimodo on the steps of Notre Dame.*

The crowd then embraces Quasimodo, and the narrator, Clopin, shouts, 'three cheers for Quasimodo!' as he is lifted into the air and celebrated. Quasimodo is now celebrated as a hero for defeating Frollo and becomes a valuable human being who is part of the community. His story arc of finding his place in society is complete now that Frollo, the main barrier to his exclusion, has gone. Harnick (2001) claims that this scene shows that Quasimodo is 'not only "one of them": fully accepted by the society around him' but also that 'his shyness and fear of rejection have been replaced with a heroic sense of purpose' (p. 93). As the crowd carry Quasimodo away, Clopin, who first introduced the story of Quasimodo, begins to sing the reprise of 'The Bells of Notre Dame' musical number. Clopin holds a puppet of Frollo as he sings, 'What makes a monster and what makes a man,' the phrase used at the film's beginning. By doing this, I would argue that the film returns to the man versus monster dichotomy to show who the actual monster is. Because after viewing Frollo's villainous actions, it has become clear that although

Quasimodo is labelled a monster throughout the film, Frolo is the true monster.

#### **6.4.5 No Romantic Ending for Quasimodo?**

After first meeting Esmeralda at the Festival of Fools, Quasimodo begins to fall in love with her. Throughout his journey, Quasimodo protects her from Frolo and expresses his love for Esmeralda through dialogue with the gargoyles. The potential of a relationship between Quasimodo, a physically disabled man, and Esmeralda, a non-disabled beautiful woman is shown throughout the film as their relationship develops. The potential of this relationship can be considered a *forbidden relationship*, a term coined by Bolt (2019) to describe the anxiety or discomfort that occurs when the relationship between a disabled people and non-disabled person is presented. In one way, the story attempts to challenge the notion of a forbidden relationship and asexuality often associated with disabled people in cultural imagery as Quasimodo's feelings grow towards Esmeralda. This is in comparison to an unforbidden relationship referring to a relationship between two disabled people which would be more acceptable as it 'does not cross the normative divide' (Bolt, 2019, p. 15). In one instance, however, Quasimodo also explains how he is unsuitable for Esmeralda because of his physical impairment. He states, 'Look, I appreciate what you're all trying to do, but let's not fool ourselves. "Ugliest face in all of Paris", remember? I don't think I'm her type.' The gargoyles, nevertheless, provide Quasimodo with the self-confidence he needs to interact with Esmeralda as they say, 'You're one heck of a guy, who wouldn't love a guy like you?' and 'Take it from us, Quasi. You've got nothing to worry about... Yeah, you're irresistible!' Scholars have argued that Quasimodo's feelings are infantilised and portrayed as puppy love which avoids the 'implications of portraying a young disabled man's sexual desire for a beautiful young woman.' (Harnick, 2001, p. 93).

Furthermore, Steinmetz (2022) argues that because of Quasimodo's physical impairments, Disney fails to give him the complete hero journey as they deny him a romantic happy ending. She explicitly states, 'If Quasimodo were not disabled, he would never have been denied the romantic relationship with Esmeralda. But because of Quasimodo's disabilities, he is portrayed as Other in the film – he is not "male" enough' (Steinmetz, 2022, p. 8). As a result, it is Captain Phoebus who ends up in a romantic relationship with Esmeralda at the end of the film. Captain Phoebus also fits the archetype of a Disney prince and hero, even though he is not the main protagonist. He is the 'ideal heteronormative male – tall, muscled and confident' (Steinmetz, 2022, p. 8), and therefore, he conforms to compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality (McRuer, 2006). Thus, although Quasimodo's journey follows the archetypal hero's journey throughout the film, the ending denies the 'elixir' that a successful hero gets at the end of the journey, either through new knowledge, object or love (Steinmetz, 2022). At the film's end, Phoebus and Esmeralda are together; therefore, Captain Phoebus 'fills this last part of the Hero's role' (Steinmetz, 2022, p. 9). This is a strong argument made by Steinmetz (2022); however, it is completely valid, particularly from a disability studies perspective. Furthermore, this shows how the film attempts to portray a forbidden relationship (a disabled character with a non-disabled character) but ultimately resists this by denying Quasimodo a relationship with Esmeralda. Rather than engaging in a forbidden relationship and disrupting the normative expectations, Esmeralda pursues an unforbidden relationship with Phoebus and the disabled character is cast aside as though they are incapable of love, relationships and intimacy.

Additionally, it is interesting to think of this argument compared to the previous films discussed in this chapter. Because both the Beast and

Ariel transform into non-normative states, and by the film's end, they are transformed back to normal and non-disabled but they also gain a romantic happy ending. On the other hand, Quasimodo does not transform because he remains in his physically impaired state, but he also does not gain a romantic relationship by the film's end. Furthermore, Disney made significant changes to *The Little Mermaid* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* compared to their original tales, where both protagonists die. The Disneyfication of these tales, therefore, created a happy ending. Ariel is not only transformed back to normal by regaining her voice and obtaining human legs but she is also given a romantic happy ending with prince Eric. Quasimodo in Hugo's original novel dies by the end of the story along with the other main characters, Frollo, Esmeralda and Phoebus. In the novel, after the death of Esmeralda, whom Quasimodo loves, he lies with her in her coffin and dies of natural causes. Through the Disneyfication of the original novel, Disney changed the ending so that the main characters do not die, just like the change made for *The Little Mermaid*. However, a major difference is that Quasimodo is not given a romantic happy ending. By the end of the film, the only difference between Ariel and Quasimodo is their physical appearance and disability. Therefore, I would agree with the claim made by Steinmetz (2022) that Disney denies Quasimodo a romantic happy ending because of his physical impairment.

Because of the ending of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Norden (2013) discusses the sequel, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame II* (2002) which gives Quasimodo a romantic relationship. The film was a direct-to-video release and is currently available on Disney+. Although aimed at very young children – unlike the cinematic animated features that were generally for all ages with a focus on children and families – the film provides Quasimodo with a 'fulfilling romantic life' (Norden, 2013, p.

174). Thus, although this was a sequel which did not have the level of success of the cinematic feature, it still provides a positive message about disabled people, acceptance and love.

Nonetheless, it is encouraging that Quasimodo's journey as a disabled hero illustrates his struggle with unacceptance and isolation. As Stephanie M (2021) claims, Quasimodo shows the audience how a disabled person can go from oppressed to accepted. Even if we argue that Quasimodo should have ended up with Esmeralda, there are still positives to take away from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The film addresses real societal issues of prejudice and oppression that marginalised people face, namely those from different ethnic backgrounds and disabled people. It also utilised the villain's function to condemn these actions, and by the end of the film, the disabled hero is accepted by others and capable of being *out there*.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how impairment and disability are used in *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid* as a temporary inconvenience that the characters, the Beast and Ariel, overcome by the film's end. The use of impairment as a temporary problem to overcome is rooted in individual and medical model views of disability, portraying disability as a plot device rather than part of a character's identity. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Quasimodo is isolated because of his physical impairment, which the film condemns through the narrative of the villain, Frollo. By the film's end, Quasimodo is accepted by society, but he does not attain a romantic happy ending like the Beast and Ariel. Instead, Quasimodo is accepted without requiring a transformation showing the progression from oppression to acceptance.

In the next chapter, Chapter Seven - From Exclusion to Affirmation: Disability as a Magical Power in *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen* - I follow on from the depiction of Quasimodo, who is a victim of social exclusion. In doing so, I explore the portrayal of Vanellope von Schweetz in *Wreck-it Ralph* and Elsa in *Frozen* to demonstrate how Disney provides progressive depictions of disability as a social construction through the negative treatment of others towards physical impairment and difference. These narratives develop from the social model to the affirmation model of disability, illustrating a didactic story of difference and acceptance.



## **7. Chapter Seven - From Exclusion to Affirmation: Disability as a Magical Power in *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen***

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter focuses on *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) and *Frozen* (2013) to demonstrate how there is an evolution in the way in which disability is represented in these films in comparison to films discussed in previous chapters. The content analysis findings showed that 4 characters are portrayed with magical powers or abilities which can be read as a disability because of the treatment they face. Therefore, in this chapter, I focus on Vanellope von Schweetz from *Wreck-It Ralph* and Elsa from *Frozen* as they are the two most recent examples of this type of representation and demonstrate a progression in representation where disability is accepted and celebrated rather than utilised as a symbolic device. Furthermore, I have analysed the representation of physical difference in *Dumbo* and how it can be read as a disability narrative aligning with the social model and affirmation models of disability in a published chapter (Gibson, 2022). Therefore, I extend that analysis by focusing on *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen* to argue that the main female protagonists, Vanellope von Schweetz and Elsa, provide a progressive model of disability, at least in comparison to the characters previously discussed, such as Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* and Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*.

Vanellope and Elsa both have powers that cause them to be treated differently and marginalised from their society. Disability is encoded into the narrative through fantasy and magical powers: Vanellope has a glitch causing her to pixelate, freeze and teleport unpredictably, and Elsa has ice powers that she struggles to control. However, because they do not conform to the expected levels of normalcy and are treated negatively, their narratives align with the social model of disability. By exploring the

narratives of these characters further, I discuss how the societal issues surrounding the character's powers can be read as metaphors for real-life experiences of disability. In doing so, I analyse disability which is not explicitly or overtly present but where the narrative functions similar to disability (Chivers & Markotić, 2010). From this, I reveal how they provide a more authentic representation of disability rather than disability functioning as a plot device for villainy or as something that needs to be overcome. Therefore, I argue that *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen* portray disability as a multifaceted experience that ultimately becomes enabling and affirmative to the characters. Moreover, Hall (2020) describes analysing disability narratives as 'exploring examples where the text does not explicitly name a particular impairment or condition, but where disability structures the logic of the narrative or ways of seeing and knowing in the text' (p. 2) and I use this as the theoretical perspective in this chapter.

In this chapter, I first explore how Vanellope's glitch can be read as a disability through the mistreatment and bullying of others. I also discuss how this depiction of disability is more progressive because it provides the context to her glitch, demonstrating the social model of disability which causes her exclusion. By the film's end, she is accepted by others and allowed to be a racer; therefore, she is part of society *despite* her differences. However, Vanellope's disability can also be viewed as a supercrip stereotype because her glitch not only becomes a part of her identity but it is also used as a superpower in her racing game. Therefore, I explore how this is portrayed, discuss how it may implicate the representation of disability and provide the context on how Vanellope became a glitch caused by the villain of the film, King Candy. For *Frozen*, I discuss how Elsa has developed into a sympathetic character, departing from Andersen's dangerous Snow Queen. This crucial change made by Disney impacts the representation of disability, allowing the narrative to

show the social construction of disability that Elsa experiences rather than utilising the disability as evil trope. Secondly, I argue that Elsa is a reverse of narrative prosthesis because the origin of her disability and magical powers is not used solely as a plot point. Although her powers are central to the film's plot, there is much more depth to Elsa's character. Thus, it transgresses symbolic representations of disability as identified in characters such as Captain Hook, Scar and Ariel.

## **7.2 'You will never be a racer because you're a glitch': Vanellope's Exclusion and Disability**

*Wreck-It Ralph* is Disney's 52<sup>nd</sup> animated feature film, released in 2012, during the studio's Revival Era (2009 – 2022). This period has been described as the second Disney Renaissance period following the moderate success of films in the Post-Renaissance Era (2000-2009), such as *Bolt*, *The Emperor's New Groove*, *Lilo & Stitch* and *Treasure Planet* (Wasko, 2020). This is partly due to the transition period that the studio was in, moving from traditional animation to CGI (Davis, 2014). The Revival Era also benefited from the acquisition of Pixar in 2006, a deal worth \$7.4 billion (Wasko, 2017).

*Wreck-It Ralph* is set in the fictional Litwak's arcade and takes place predominantly within the arcade machines and games. The characters from the various video games congregate in the central plaza once the arcade has closed for the night. The film follows Ralph's journey to win a medal, something that is impossible for him to do in the confines of his own game. At the start of the film, it is revealed that Ralph - who is the villain of his game Fix-it Felix Jr - does not want to be the bad guy anymore. His adventure outside of his game takes him to Hero's Duty. In this first-person shooter game, he attempts to win a medal and, along the way, meets Sergeant Calhoun, the female leader of the game who becomes a major character throughout the rest of the film. Additionally,

Sergeant Calhoun was coded in the content analysis as a character with post-traumatic stress disorder which the film portrays in a realistic way. After obtaining a medal, Ralph falls into an escape pod and is launched out of the game and into Sugar Rush, a racing car game. In Sugar Rush, Ralph meets Vanellope von Schweetz. Vanellope uses Ralph's medal to enter the nightly race, determining the playable characters for the next day in the arcade. However, it is soon revealed that Vanellope is not allowed to enter the race because she is a glitch. Her glitch provides a disability narrative to the film and the social isolation she experiences portrays 'disability as normality' (Quayson, 2007, p. 52) and illustrates the social model of disability in action.

Vanellope self-identifies with her glitch in a way that labels it as a condition or impairment. In doing so, this makes the disability narrative much clearer to the viewer. After the racers have entered the nightly race, the other characters find Vanellope preparing her makeshift DIY racing car. She reassures Taffyta, one of the prominent but rival racers, that she will compete in the race after using Ralph's medal as payment. However, Taffyta replies, 'Yeah, well, King Candy says glitches can't race.' Vanellope responds, 'I'm not a glitch, Taffyta. I've just got pixlexia, okay?' and glitches at the same (Figure 15). This demonstrates how her glitch, or pixlexia, is triggered by her emotions. In addition, this play on words which makes her impairment sound similar to dyslexia is a crucial example in the film where Vanellope's glitch can be considered a representation of disability.



Figure 15 - Vanellope glitches as she reacts to Taffyta.

Interestingly, the junior novelisation of *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) provides a more nuanced narrative of disability. Following this interaction between Vanellope and Taffyta, in the junior novelisation, Vanellope states, 'Uh, a code-reading disability. It occurs when the corpus does not properly recognize certain symbols' (Trimble, 2012, p. 66). This provides context to Vanellope's disability. And thus, although the junior novelisation is a shortened version of the film, it gives a more detailed understanding of Vanellope's disability. Furthermore, because Vanellope explicitly uses the term disability, it enables readers to relate her glitch to the experience of disability – something that may not have been picked up on by viewers of the film.

In the film, after Vanellope explains her condition, she is bullied by the other racers who tell her that she cannot race because she is a glitch. Taffyta sits in Vanellope's racing car and mimics Vanellope's glitch as she states, 'The rules are there for a reason, Vanellope. To protect us... And then, all of a sudden, oh, no. I'm glitching!' She exaggerates Vanellope's glitch, pulls the car's steering wheel off and maliciously states, 'You're an accident waiting to happen.' She then throws the wheel at Vanellope, which makes Vanellope glitch. All of the drivers laugh and begin to pull her car apart. Vanellope shouts, 'I just want to race like you guys,' and

Taffyta cruelly responds, 'You will never be a racer because you're a glitch. And that's all you'll ever be,' before pushing Vanellope to the floor. This treatment of Vanellope illustrates the role that society plays in discriminating against people with impairments (Ellis, 2015).

Furthermore, Vanellope is viewed as dangerous, which makes her glitch a problem. This treatment excludes Vanellope from the racing game and, ultimately, disables her. It can also be read as a metaphor for real-life experiences of disability, such as someone with autism experiencing discrimination or someone in a wheelchair who cannot access a building. By showing the treatment of Vanellope's glitch by others, the film provides an honest and progressive dialogue on being different and living with disability placed upon them, even if it is encoded in a fantasy setting. This disability representation can be categorised as Quayson's (2007) 'disability as normality' (p. 52) because disability is being used to critique society and its treatment of disability by others (Resene, 2017). On the one hand, this is encouraging as it demonstrates how Disney is attempting to portray a story of being different and highlighting the role that society plays in treating, often negatively, those who diverge from normalcy. On the other hand, however, Vanellope's glitch is likely to require a reading of disability which may need the lived experience of disability or the lens of disability studies to be recognised.

### **7.2.1 A Cause of Evil: The Origin of Vanellope's Glitch**

A common stereotype of disability frequently used in films is the supercrip stereotype where a character is given 'abilities or "powers" that operate in direct relationship with or contrast to their disability' (Schalk, 2016, p. 81). In *Wreck-It Ralph*, it is revealed later in the film that Vanellope was not originally a glitch but became one after King Candy, the main antagonist, tried to delete her code. After a failed attempt to erase Princess Vanellope from Sugar Rush, Vanellope becomes impaired and

thereafter known as a glitch. As a result, King Candy erased the memories of all the characters in the game so that Vanellope was only known as a glitch. No one, including Vanellope herself, could remember her as the kingdom's princess and number one racer. This backstory of Vanellope's glitch provides important context for the treatment towards her. She is led to believe she cannot race because she is a glitch and the other racers also believe this which results in their negative treatment and bullying. And ultimately, she becomes excluded and isolated from the rest of society in Sugar Rush.

At the film's end, Vanellope crosses the finish line after the final race which resets the game. At this point, Vanellope is revealed as the game's rightful ruler and the main character, Princess Vanellope. Since the game has reset, everything should revert back to its original settings, including Vanellope's glitch disappearing. Doing this, however, would depict her disability as becoming fixed which would follow the traits of the supercrip stereotype of disability (Schalk, 2016). In addition, this would follow similar treatments of impairment depicted in the ending of *The Little Mermaid* when Ariel gets her voice back and the Beast's transformation in *Beauty and Beast*. Indeed, Rummel-Hudson (2012) recalls the first time he watched this part of the film in the cinema with their young daughter, who is disabled, stating, 'I was worried when the story revealed that Vanellope wasn't always a glitch... I remembered at the end of *The Little Mermaid* when Ariel got her voice back... I braced myself for the same thing to happen when Vanellope was "fixed"' (para, 6). However, the story subverts the overcoming disability trope associated with the supercrip stereotype of disability and the individual and medical model of disability to provide a transgressive and affirmative depiction of disability. Because even though the game had been restored so that Vanellope was the central character of Sugar Rush again, she also still had her glitch. As Rummel-Hudson (2012) continues to note, 'The

little girl [Vanellope] who was broken and put upon by the world was victorious, and she was still broken [had a glitch]' and states that Vanellope 'became a beloved character in the game, but it was pointed out that she achieved popularity with players while retaining her glitch' (para 9). The reveal of Vanellope as the main character and princess of the game illustrates how the villain caused her glitch, and her exclusion was caused by the treatment towards her glitch.

Although Vanellope's glitch becomes a superpower used in the racing game which could be read as a depiction of the 'superpowered supercrip narrative' (Schalk, 2016, p. 81), I believe that Vanellope, to some extent, disrupts this notion. Vanellope's glitch does not exist simply as a power but also provides social commentary on disability through a social model perspective. For instance, it is clear that Vanellope and the other racers had super abilities before Vanellope's code was tampered with and became a glitch. As such, in the film, her glitch becomes a useful narrative of disability as it shows the character's reaction to her difference, but it does not evolve to a supercrip depiction because it exists in the game like other superpowers. By the film's end, when the game is restored, Vanellope uses her glitch as a superpower, but other players also have in-game powers. Therefore, the emphasis on her glitch throughout the film is because of the events that had previously occurred to highlight the negative treatment towards her difference. This is echoed by Asher-Perrin (2012) who discusses the importance of Vanellope's disability and its acceptance as they state:

No one would make the claim that having a disability is a treat or incredibly useful, but Vanellope's acceptance of the glitch does send a good message to any children with disabilities who might be watching the film; that it is a part of who they are and embracing every part of yourself can lead to greatness. (para 6)



The portrayal of Vanellope as a glitch provides a representation of disability that offers a social commentary on how people who are different become disabled by the societal barriers imposed on them. I have argued that Vanellope's glitch is a magical power that can be read as a disability because of the way she is treated by others. However, unlike in the previous chapter where characters such as the Beast and Ariel overcome their disability, Vanellope remains the same and is accepted by others. This shows a progression in the way in which disability is portrayed in Disney animated films where social commentary is provided to show how disability is caused by societal barriers such as negative attitudes. This is also the case for Elsa who I discuss in more detail in the next section and whose narrative provides an even stronger example of the social model and affirmation model of disability in action.

### **7.3 From Dangerous Villain to Sympathetic Hero: Disney's Transformation of Andersen's Snow Queen**

In *Wreck-It Ralph*, Vanellope's glitch was encoded as a disability. In doing so, the film foregrounds the difficulties that individuals with physical impairments face, mainly through exclusion and isolation caused by others. I have illustrated how this occurs through the treatment of Vanellope's glitch. By the film's end, she is accepted by society and lives with her glitch. Similarly, *Frozen* also uses a magical power encoded as a disability in the character Elsa. The film emphasises the role that society plays in her isolation and disability due to their reaction to her ice powers. I argue that *Frozen* develops Elsa as a disability narrative in greater detail than Vanellope's glitch to provide a more nuanced depiction of disability encoded as a magical power.

*Frozen* was released in 2013 and quickly became Disney's most successful animated film grossing \$1.2 billion worldwide (Konnikova, 2014). The 53<sup>rd</sup> animated feature from the Walt Disney Animation Studio

had unprecedented popularity, leading to merchandise such as Anna and Elsa dolls and dresses selling worldwide (Wood, 2014). The success of *Frozen* led to its expansion as a franchise and further success with the release of short films, a Broadway stage adaptation, story books, costumes, action figures, various theme park attractions, and a feature-length sequel, *Frozen II*, released in 2019. The animated film is loosely based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Snow Queen* (Andersen, 1845) - although some scholars argue that the two stories are almost entirely different (Yee, 2014). Disney followed the original fairy tale more closely in the earlier stages of development until they made significant changes for narrative purposes. Nevertheless, a few elements of the original story feature in *Frozen*. Producer Peter Del Vecho spoke about this when addressing the difficulties that were faced when adapting *The Snow Queen*, stating:

'Inspired by' means exactly that. There is snow and there is ice and there is a Queen, but other than that, we depart from it quite a bit. We do try to bring the scope and the escape that you would expect but do it in a way that can understand the characters and relate to them. (Wright, 2013, sec. 5)

In Andersen's tale, the main protagonists, Kay and Gerda, are neighbours and friends described as being as close as siblings. In *Frozen*, the main protagonists, Anna and Elsa, are actual siblings and both female, contributing to one of the key themes in the film: female and familial love. The bond between Anna and Elsa represents siblinghood on the one hand and female bonds on the other. As Yee (2014) argues, the relationship between Anna and Elsa signifies a celebration of 'girl power' (p. 14) and female empowerment, regardless of whether the females are related or not. However, their sibling relationship is also crucial to the story because their separation, caused by their parents, drives the plot for

the majority of the film. In her chapter *Do You Want to Build Childhood Trauma? Parental Authority and Agency in Disney's Frozen*, playing on the name of the first song to feature in *Frozen*, 'Do You Want to Build a Snowman?' Ayo (2022) argues that '*Frozen* offers audiences a cautionary tale on how not to care for children' (p. 74). Providing an analysis of the role that the King and Queen (Anna and Elsa's parents) play during their mere 10 minutes of screen time, she argues that the treatment of Elsa increases her fear and by isolating her away from everyone, including Anna, it causes a divide between the sisters.

A noticeable difference between the original tale and the animated film is the role of the Snow Queen. In Andersen's fairy tale, the Snow Queen is the main antagonist who captures Kay after falling victim to the villainous troll. He has his eyes and heart pierced with broken glass – which will turn his heart into a lump of ice – and is kept under her spell in her ice palace (Andersen, 2013). The plot follows Gerda's journey looking for Kay, and when she finds him cold and unresponsive, she sheds a tear. Her tear drops onto Kay, which begins to thaw his frozen heart. As she continues to cry, the tears wash out the glass from his eyes, and he begins to thaw with no damage from the glass or frozen conditions. In Disney's animated feature, Elsa's character is both Kay and the Snow Queen, and thus, although she is the main protagonist alongside Anna, she also possesses dangerous ice powers. The transformation of the Snow Queen creates character complexity in Elsa's character and ambiguity in the heroine and villainess character roles. Indeed, like in Andersen's tale, where splinters infect and freeze Kay's heart, Elsa accidentally causes Anna's heart to freeze. Elsa cannot control her powers when she is anxious or agitated. This happens in several parts of the film, and in two scenes, she strikes Anna with her ice power causing physical injury. And thus, the dangerous Snow Queen in Andersen's tale is transformed into Queen Elsa, a sympathetic hero that is also scary and possesses

dangerous powers (Resene, 2017). Disney has also transformed Gerda and Kay's friendship into a story about sisterly love with Anna and Elsa. In doing so, Disney attempts to move beyond the traditional heterosexual romantic love story used in most films to focus on familial love through the sisters' relationship. There is, however, a secondary narrative that follows Anna's romantic relationships with Prince Hans and Kristoff. By allowing the love between the sisters to be primary and romantic love to be secondary, the narrative can focus on female connection, family and empowerment (Law, 2014).

During the early stages of development, Elsa was created as a straightforward villain, much like the Snow Queen in the original tale (Wright, 2013). In early sketches of Elsa by artist Claire Keane (Solomon, 2013) (Figure 16), her appearance is similar to the classic Disney villainesses of earlier decades, such as Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* and Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty*. As I have discussed in chapter 5 on villains, female villains have been frequently depicted as a femme fatale (Bell, 1995) who are beautiful and seductive but also powerful and dangerous. They are also aware of their beauty and use their charm to win a battle. The evolution of Elsa as a sympathetic character moves away from the archetypal view of powerful women as evil villains. And this could be argued as a step forward in gender representation (Llompart & Brugué, 2020) as well as disability. This narrative choice develops Elsa's character from a flat villain to a sympathetic hero. As a result, it progresses the narrative but also goes beyond traditional plot clichés and tropes associated with disability and villainy.



Figure 16 - Original sketches of Elsa as a villain.

One of the main turning points to the changes in Elsa's character occurred during the development of the hit song 'Let It Go,' which was initially Elsa's villain song. However, songwriters Kristen Anderson-Lopez and Robert Lopez saw Elsa as vulnerable, scared, and someone who was struggling to control and come to terms with her powers (Puchko, 2014). As a result, Elsa is much more developed than a flat villain; she is a complex, vulnerable, sympathetic character. For example, the Snow Queen in Andersen's tale is evil, but the snow queen character in *Frozen* is merely afraid and vulnerable with dangerous powers. Co-director Jennifer Lee also felt that Elsa needed more development, stating:

The Snow Queen in the original story is not a well-drawn character, she's very symbolic. We had to discover who she was and what she would like, and the more we talked, the more exciting it was to think about these two [Anna and Elsa] as sisters. (Wright, 2013, sec. 5)

From this, we can see how the development of Elsa's character helped to create a disability plot that can be read through Elsa's powers and her treatment by others. Following this, Disney developed the plot points, and it became clear that Elsa did not work as a villain anymore. The film's producer, Peter Del Vecho, claimed, 'The problem was that we felt like we had seen it before' and stated that 'It wasn't satisfying. We had no emotional connection to Elsa - we didn't care about her because she had spent the whole movie being the villain. We weren't drawn in. The characters weren't relatable' (Hibberd, 2017, para. 6). At the same time, Disney's Story Trust members, including executive producer John Lasseter, were also having trouble visualising Elsa as a true villain. Lasseter discussed a connection between Elsa and his 10-year-old son, who was recently diagnosed with type 1 diabetes. He stated, 'I thought of Sam [his son], and I was thinking of Elsa. She was born with this. Why is she the villain?' (Resene, 2017, para. 1). These two crucial points - the character development of Elsa during 'Let It Go' and the realisation that Elsa was simply born with powers and not evil because of them - led to the rewriting of the film's script. This illustrates an improvement of disability representation. Consequently, Elsa's character was developed from a one-dimensional villain into a conflicted young woman who could not control her powers. Anna and Elsa became sisters, and Elsa became the main protagonist alongside Anna. And most importantly, this allowed Elsa to be transformed from a 'villainous queen to a sympathetic teen' (Resene, 2017). This is particularly promising because it demonstrates how Disney made a conscious decision not to associate Elsa's powers - which can be viewed in the same way as a disability - with villainy.

Furthermore, because the decision was only made once they realised it did not work logically in the story and had all been done before, this reveals the evolution of narrative expectations from Disney. Because the archetype villain with an impairment, such as Captain Hook or Scar,

had been done before, they went beyond the overused plot clichés, which led to the ideological progressivism of the story. Therefore, when reading *Frozen* as a disability narrative, we can see how the story's progression, specifically the development of less archetypal characters, contributes to an affirmative depiction of disability. In chapter 5, where I have discussed Disney villains, I argue that disability is often used as a shorthand for evil and explore how this is particularly prevalent in older films. And thus, it is encouraging to see that Disney changed Elsa's character. Her magical power is not exploited and used as a simple plot device but is developed into an accurate reflection of isolation and exclusion due to being different. Further, this works as a metaphor for the experience of living with and managing a disability. These changes allow the story to show how Elsa struggles with her powers and follows her journey to accept herself and become accepted by others. Ultimately, she overcomes the stigma without overcoming her powers, as they become part of her identity. Linton (1998) observes this in narratives which involve 'not an actual physical overcoming of impairment, but an overcoming of stigma and of the implicit expectations of what a disabled person can and cannot do or achieve' (p. 17). From this, I would argue that *Frozen* can be regarded as a didactic story of acceptance.

### **7.3.1 'We will limit her contact with people and keep her powers hidden from everyone, including Anna': Parental and Societal Treatment**

For much of her childhood, Elsa is isolated in her bedroom by her parents due to her powers and the inability to control them. Ayo (2022) argues that her parents 'teach her to be ashamed and afraid of herself, instruct her that her only options are to conform to or leave society and deny her of true love and acceptance' (p. 75). The isolation and exclusion that Elsa experiences because of her powers draws similarities to the treatment of

disabled people and resonates with the social model of disability which states the problem is not the person with the impairment but the judgement and treatment of that impairment from society (Oliver, 2013). And therefore, by showing the treatment of Elsa in this way, *Frozen* allows the audience to potentially relate to Elsa's experience and feel empathy for her. The treatment of Elsa's powers by her parents and the rest of society are the cause of her isolation and fear. Their behaviour illustrates the pressure to pass as *normal* and how the mishandling of her powers leads to disability causing fear and shame. In the section that follows, I will explore the actions of Elsa's parents and how they contribute to her isolation and ultimate disablement throughout her childhood, which impacts her self-confidence and causes a divide between the two sisters, Elsa and Anna. As Ayo (2022) notes, the role of Elsa's parents is overlooked by many but plays a crucial part in the rest of the story. And I agree that the treatment of Elsa's powers by her parents specifically, as well as the rest of society causes her to experience fear and isolation. As a consequence, I believe that this treatment shows how Elsa's powers can be read as a disability.

Elsa becomes scared and fearful of herself because she is warned by the head troll of the danger that her powers pose. This warning is followed by the actions from her parents who lock her in her bedroom causing a barrier between Elsa and the rest of the world as a result of her magical powers. The fear that Elsa feels remains her primary emotion for most of the film causing her segregation to continue. This impacts her own self-esteem and confidence as well as her relationship with her sister, Anna. At the start of the film, there is a scene from their childhood where the young sisters wake up in the middle of the night and run downstairs to play in the snow created by Elsa's powers. Anna says she 'wants to build a snowman' and asks Elsa to 'do the magic,' to which Elsa smiles. At this point, it is clear that Elsa's magic strengthens the bond between the



two sisters, who can play together regardless of Elsa's differences. However, this quickly changes when Elsa slips and blasts ice from her hands uncontrollably which hits Anna in the forehead. Anna collapses, and a strand of her hair turns white because she has turned as cold as ice. Their parents rush in and their father states, 'Elsa, what have you done? This is getting out of hand.' In this opening scene, the film is not only portraying Elsa's ability as a magical power, common in many children's stories, but also as something familiar to the experience of living with disability as it depicts the actual consequences of her power. It also shows how her super-ability can be disabling not only to herself but also to others (Schmiesing, 2018). By showing this scene at the start of the film, it provides the backstory to Elsa's powers in a way that highlights both the good and the bad. On the one hand, Anna and Elsa play together in a magical winter wonderland created by Elsa, and on the other, Anna is physically impaired by those same magical powers.

Their parents take Anna and Elsa to the trolls for help, where the head troll, Grand Pabbie, asks if Elsa was 'born with the powers or cursed?' The terminology used here situates her powers as negative and something that cannot be accepted or seen as a gift. Up to this point, there has been no opportunity for Elsa to speak about what happened, nor have her powers been spoken about in a potentially encouraging way. The head troll then erases Anna's memory of her sister's powers and the accident, stating that it was for the best. However, this has implications, which are revealed later in the story when the sisters grow up. Because Anna does not know about Elsa's powers or the accident that happened, she does not understand why Elsa does not spend any time with her and is locked away in her bedroom. The head troll speaks directly to Elsa as he states, 'Your power will only grow. There is beauty in it but also great danger. You must learn to control it. Fear will be your greatest enemy.' At the same time, he creates an image in the sky of a blue female figure

making ice flurries in front of a crowd, demonstrating the possibilities of Elsa's powers when she can control them. However, this suddenly changes, and the female figure turns dark red signifying danger as Elsa's powers become out of control and the crowd turn on her and attack her. Young Elsa gasps and becomes visibly frightened over the potential danger of her powers. This warning cautions Elsa and her parents about society's potential reaction and fear of her powers which will cause people to turn on Elsa if her magic causes a threat. Her parents focus on this part of the warning as they state:

We'll protect her. She can learn to control it, I'm sure. Until then, we'll lock the gates. We'll reduce the staff. We will limit her contact with people and keep her powers hidden from everyone, including Anna.

This results in the parents choosing to isolate Elsa in her bedroom until she can learn to control her powers. And although her parents may have thought this was the safest option for Elsa, this causes more harm than good as they inadvertently teach her to be afraid of her powers and herself. Consequently, this is something that both Anna and Elsa must deal with throughout the film. Indeed, overcoming fear and rebuilding their relationship as sisters are two key themes throughout the film's diegesis.

The treatment of Elsa by her parents illustrates a realistic experience of the difficulties parents face when raising a disabled child (Wheeler, 2019). Although it can be argued that as time passes and Elsa grows up, the parents could have helped Elsa rather than keeping her locked away, their actions continue to exemplify the social model of disability. In a blog post about *Frozen*, disability media studies scholar Elizabeth Elcessor discusses how Elsa's powers may be interpreted as a disability akin to the experiences of disabled children. She states,

'Because others aren't prepared for her differences, she is isolated and takes on significant shame around her powers; this recalls what we call the "social model" of disability' (Donvito, 2019, para. 6). She continues to explain how Elsa's parents play a vital role in increasing her isolation by choosing to hide her powers and encouraging her to be normal, rather than learning to cope with her powers and taking pride in her true self. Wheeler (2019) relates this to people with autism and states how 'fans employ the social model of disability, seeing Elsa's biggest problem in others' misunderstanding rather than the autism itself' (p. 29).

One of the biggest impacts of Elsa's segregation is her relationship with her sister, Anna. As Elsa's seclusion has continued over the years, it is evidence that Elsa's parents have not attempted to help her live with her powers but only to conceal them. The song 'Do You Want to Build a Snowman' not only progresses the film's plot but also reveals how much time has passed depicting the sisters maturing from young children to teenagers. At the start of the song, a young Anna sings to the door of Elsa's bedroom, repeating the question she asked in the previous scene when they were younger, before the accident. She sings, 'Do you want to build a snowman? Come on, let's go and play,' and it is clear that Anna wants to play with her sister like she remembers because although the head troll erased Anna's memories of Elsa's magic and the accident, he left the fun parts. On the other side of the door, a young Elsa tells her sister to go away as she's looking out the window and accidentally freezes the windows and becomes visibly frightened. And it is clear that Elsa is still unaware of the strength of her abilities, how to control them and that her powers are highly responsive to her emotions.

Anna returns to Elsa's door several times at different periods during their childhood where she asks the same question 'do you want to build a snowman' every time. However, it is not until the sisters are a bit older

that the strength of Elsa's powers are revealed. The parents are in Elsa's bedroom when she states, 'I'm scared. It's getting stronger' as she is surrounded by a frozen room. Her powers are evidently getting stronger because her fear has also increased. At this point in the film, it becomes clear that there is a vicious cycle between Elsa's powers and her emotions. Her emotions only get stronger the longer she is locked in her room in fear but as her emotions rise, so do her powers. And when her powers intensify and thus become harder to control, her fear and anxiety increase further. In Andersen's original tale, Kai is a victim to the snow powers of the ice queen which he has no control over whereas for Elsa, she learns at a very young age that she is dangerous. Although she has control of her powers, she is unable to control them because of the fear and shame that has been placed upon her by her parents and the head troll (Halsall, 2019). The fear that Elsa displays here remains her primary emotion and reaction for most of the film showing the harmful impact of her isolation creating a disabling barrier that prevents her from being accepted by society.

One of the classic archetypes in Disney animation is the evil stepmother (Davis, 2006) however, *Frozen* utilises the role of Anna and Elsa's biological mother (and father) to move away from this trope. In doing so, this allows the treatment towards Elsa to be recognised as pressures of being a parent, regardless of if their treatment is right or wrong, rather than a villainous act. For a Disney film, it is somewhat unique for Anna and Elsa to have two biological parents because Disney's animated films frequently portray single parents, stepparents or no parents (Zurcher et al., 2019). However, although Anna and Elsa's parents die when they are teenagers and only have 10 minutes of screen time; they still considerably impact the story. Although the parents forced Elsa into isolation because of her powers, some may argue that they did this because they were simply scared and did not know what else to do to

protect their daughters. They want to protect Elsa from herself and society and Anna from Elsa. However, this act of isolation is a treatment that could be considered an action that a villain would carry out, particularly if Elsa's parents were stepparents. As discussed in the previous chapter with the example of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Frollo is Quasimodo's adopted father. He treats him similarly to Elsa's parents treat her, by locking him away and isolating him from society because of his physical impairment. This is also the case for the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White's stepmother; Lady Tremaine, Anastasia and Drizella, Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters in *Cinderella*; and Mother Gothel, Rapunzel's stepmother in *Tangled*. In all of these instances, the stepmother or adoptive parent is the primary parental figure as well as the villain of the film. As such, although Elsa's parents cause much of her fear, isolation and disablement, their role as biological parents rather than adopted or stepparents is significant and subverts this classic Disney trope.

Towards the end of the song 'Do You Want to Build a Snowman,' Elsa is out of her bedroom for the first time as she is saying goodbye to her parents before they depart on a sea voyage. Elsa is still afraid and asks her parents worriedly if they have to go, with her father responding, 'You'll be fine, Elsa.' At this moment, the parents do not seem as scared or fearful as they once were when they first isolated Elsa in her room. They leave Elsa, reassuring her that she is okay, but she is already living in fear after years of isolation. In *Frozen II*, it is revealed that the King and Queen went on the sea voyage to Ahtohallan to try and find out the truth about Elsa's powers. This explains why they reassured Elsa when they left because they hoped to return with answers about her powers. Moments later, however, there is a shot of the ship caught in a storm, and the palace staff draw a curtain on the King and Queen's portrait signifying their death. Then Anna sings the final part of the song, which

has a slower tempo to depict the emotion of the parents' death and the realisation that the two sisters are still segregated. They are sitting on either side of Elsa's door, and Anna asks for the final time, 'Do you want to build a snowman?' with a tear in her eye. A tracking shot is used to portray the emotion as the camera passes through the door from Anna to Elsa who is sitting on the other side of the door. This camera shot reveals that the sisters are physically very close as they sit back-to-back with only the door keeping them apart. However, this juxtaposes their relationship, which has fallen apart due to Elsa's isolation. The final shot zooms out on Elsa in her bedroom, surrounded by ice and snow flurries that drift in the air, revealing her strong emotions of grief, fear and loneliness. This echoes Halsall's (2019) claim that Elsa's magic has been 'replaced by deep shame and fear of the awful potential that she conceals beneath her blonde exterior' (p. 15) which has remained the same throughout her childhood and after the death of her parents.

### **7.3.2 'Conceal, Don't Feel': Trying to Pass as Normal**

Disabled people face barriers in society and one of these barriers is discrimination and negative treatment by others in response to their impairment. This is emphasised in the social model of disability where people with impairments become disabled because of the treatment towards them which includes negative attitudes. As many of these attitudes are rooted in the medical model of disability, there is an expectation for the person with an impairment to fix themselves or attempt to pass as normal, which often requires the use of prosthetic devices. As a result, disabled people feel like they have to hide their impairment to fit into the norm or to be accepted by others (Cameron, 2014).

Elsa's father, the King of Arendelle, places gloves on Elsa's hands, telling her that she must conceal her powers (Figure 17) during the

opening scene and musical number 'Do You Want to Build a Snowman?'. He states, 'See? Conceal it.' Elsa responds, 'Don't feel it,' and they both say, 'Don't let it show,' as she conforms to her parents' wishes of hiding her powers.



*Figure 17 - Elsa's father places gloves on her hands to conceal her powers.*

As Schmiesing (2018) suggests, the gloves work as prosthetics that correct the problematic body part and are given to her to restore her state of normalcy. Therefore, although the gloves help her conceal her powers, they are also a symbol of safety and normalcy taught by her parents. This treats Elsa's powers as a curse and something that she must hide from the world. By doing this, Elsa is taught to believe that she must hide away and that her power is a barrier stopping her from fully participating in society. The attempt to pass as normal is exhibited through Elsa's parents' requirement for her to wear gloves. After the death of her parents, however, it is clear that conforming to the expected levels of normalcy through controlling her behaviour is still difficult for Elsa. This is most obvious during the events that unfold on Coronation Day.

Following the death of the King and Queen, Elsa will be crowned the Queen of Arendelle. The two sisters show contrasting emotions for the

day. Through the song, 'For the First Time in Forever,' Anna excitedly runs through the castle, showcasing her excitement and eagerness for the castle gates to open and what possibilities they may hold. At the same time, Elsa is nervous and apprehensive about her forthcoming appearance at the coronation. However, unlike Anna, Elsa has to conceal her powers and pass as normal. Elsa sings, 'Don't let them in, don't let them see. Be the good girl you always have to be' as she looks up at the portrait of her father. At this moment, Elsa takes off her gloves and repeats the phrase she once said with her father, 'Conceal, don't feel,' but changes the final part from 'don't let it show' to 'put on a show' as she picks up the royal sceptre and orb ready for the coronation. Her bare hands symbolise her vulnerability and fear forced upon her by her father. This is evident in two ways: firstly, because her father required her to wear gloves and hide her powers; secondly, as she is next in line to the throne, she is now becoming Queen following her parent's death. And thus, she now has to try to control her fears and powers to take control of Arendelle. In the next shot, Elsa then faces away from the painting on the wall, and the frame depicts her in the same position as her father when he was crowned king (Figure 18), except Elsa has a nervous look on her face in comparison to her father, who appears confident and assured. The objects in Elsa's hands begin to freeze, demonstrating that she still cannot control her powers for long and has become dependent on her gloves. However, it is worth noting that in other parts of the film, Elsa appears to use her powers with other parts of her body. She freezes the floor to create ice wonderlands with her feet when she and Anna played together when they were young, and when Elsa escapes Arendelle and runs across the fjord, she freezes the water with each step.





*Figure 18 - Elsa stands in front of her father's portrait with a nervous look before her coronation.*

Linton (1998) claims that for those with a concealed impairment, passing as normal can be a deliberate effort to avoid discrimination but can also deny the disabled person their actual bodily state. Further, Linton states, 'Even when a disability is obvious and impossible to hide on an ongoing basis, families sometimes create minifictions that disabled people are forced to play along with' (1998, p. 20). The minifictions that Linton suggests, are evident through Elsa's parents' reaction to, and treatment of her powers. By concealing her powers, her parents attempt to pass her as normal. However, full passing, to take on a non-disabled identity and act as normal, is emotionally tiring because it requires a performance (Cameron, 2014). Linton (1998) notes that, due to the expectation of passing, disabled people often feel the need to come out and explicitly identify as disabled. In this way, 'Shame and fear are personal burdens, but if these tales are told, we can demonstrate how the personal is indeed the political' (Linton, 1998, p. 22). Linton's claim demonstrates the dominant expectation in society to conform to the perceived level of normalcy. From this, it is clear that Elsa attempts to pass as normal, mainly through the treatment of her parents. In a scene later, when Elsa lets go of her gloves, she is also letting go at attempting to pass as normal and claiming her identity.

During the ceremony, Elsa finds it hard to pass as normal. She gets through the ceremony but only after quickly putting her gloves back on when the items begin to freeze before anyone notices. This shows that there are limits to how much she can do to appear as normal (Wheeler, 2019). However, she fails to control her powers and contain her state of normalcy when Anna begins to aggravate her. When Anna tries to get Elsa's attention, she accidentally pulls off one of her gloves. Elsa's emotions are already heightened because this is the first time she has had to be in public, and she is still struggling to control her powers. Nevertheless, unaware of Elsa's ability, Anna continues to press her, asking, 'Why do you shut me out?' Elsa reacts by accidentally unleashing her ice powers and creating a barrier of ice around her. The crowd is shocked and labels her a monster as Elsa flees in distress, leaving behind the kingdom that she has unknowingly cast under an eternal winter. The labelling of Elsa as a monster is similar to characters such as the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* and Quasimodo from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, demonstrating society's reaction to their physical impairment. Although Elsa's powers does not manifest in her physical appearance, it is treated in the same way because she does not conform to the expected level of normalcy (Davis, 2016). Her inability to control her powers in front of the crowd results in her being treated as non-human (Schmiesing, 2018). By running away, Elsa is not only escaping her lack of control but also society's non-acceptance and judgement of her powers.

It is important to note that it would not be unusual for Disney to transform a character like Elsa into a villain at this point in the story. Characters often turn evil after becoming cursed or impaired if they do not change back to their original normative state (Resene, 2017). This is the case for Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, whom I have demonstrated is seeking revenge because of his physical impairment. Moreover, this also

includes several evil queens and villainesses, such as the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and Maleficent in *Sleeping Beauty* who turn evil because something did not go their way. In *Frozen* however, Elsa does not transform into a character seeking revenge because she cannot control her powers but instead stays as a sympathetic hero. The story follows her as she escapes Arendelle and creates an ice palace where she can be free from normative restrictions. This increases the audience's empathy for Elsa as she flees Arendelle in distress and finds comfort and confidence in herself for the first time (in forever).

### **7.3.3 Reversing Narrative Prosthesis: Origin of Elsa's Disability is Not Used as a Plot Device**

Elsa's magical powers are central to the film's plot. They are the reason Elsa was isolated by her parents and the cause of her and Anna's separation throughout their childhood, impacting their relationship as sisters. They are also the reason why Elsa runs away from Arendelle, which provides the narrative arc for the rest of the film, allowing Anna's journey (to find her sister) to take place. However, unlike many Disney disabled characters, Elsa's disability is not used solely as a plot device. Instead, the story develops to give time to show how her condition impacts her rather than her ice power being used simply to forward the plot. The social commentary attached to Elsa's powers focus on how other characters judge them and mistreat her because of them. This suggests that the problem is not her powers but the discrimination she faces because of them. And thus, because the narrative shows her struggles caused by society's reaction to her powers, the representation of disability is more nuanced and progressive. This is similar to Vanellope and the treatment she faces because of her glitch. However, I would argue that is clearer in Elsa's story as disability, as a result of social exclusion, plays a

bigger part in the narrative of the film and has been informed by character development.

As disability studies scholars claim, disability often demands a story (Berube, 2016), is depicted as a stereotype such as the criminal, the monster or the villain (Longmore, 2003), or is used as a metaphorical device (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). As discussed throughout this thesis, narrative prosthesis is the theory used to illustrate how disability is used 'as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potency, and analytical insight' (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 49). Through this concept, one can explore how the disabled body is used as a metaphorical opportunity and plot device that often takes the narrative in a new direction. Narrative prosthesis or the dependency of disability, highlights the prevalence of disability and how it is exploited as a symbolic device to develop a story rather than existing as part of a character's identity. In Disney films, several characters illustrate narrative prosthesis. In the two previous chapters, I have discussed how disability is used to symbolise evilness and villainy and how it is used as a problem to be overcome. Elsa, however, subverts both of these. Her development as a character by Disney makes her into a sympathetic hero, and although she is still dangerous, she is not evil.

Moreover, by the film's end, Elsa does not overcome her powers; she retains them and is now in control and accepted by the citizens of Arendelle. And thus, I would argue that disability is not used as a plot point as described in narrative prosthesis (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). Elsa, therefore, reverses narrative prosthesis in two ways. Firstly, her magical powers are not used simply to progress the plot of the story as there is much more context demonstrating disability as a lived experience. Secondly, at the start of the film, Elsa conforms to the expectation of normalcy through the use of prosthetics – the gloves placed on her hands

by her parents to conceal her powers – but ultimately rejects these literal prosthetics and embraces her powers. In this way, Elsa subverts the concept of narrative prosthesis. Her disability does not symbolise something else, such as villainy or pity for narrative purposes, but simply becomes part of her identity.

#### **7.3.4 'All my life has been a series of doors in my face': The Motif of Doors to Signify Isolation**

Doors are used as a motif throughout *Frozen* to symbolise isolation, exclusion, and freedom. For example, the song 'Do You Want to Build a Snowman?' uses a closed door to represent Elsa's isolation and the separation between the two sisters. The mise-en-scene throughout the song depicts the closed door in each frame, emphasising the separation between Anna and Elsa. As Anna returns to Elsa's door, knocking and asking if she wants to build a snowman every time, the closed door symbolises their separation. The choice to keep the door closed throughout illustrates a desire from Disney to remind the audience of the sister's isolation from each other and the rest of the world. The song also takes place over time which portrays the sisters growing up and throughout this time, it shows how Anna begins to accept that the door will remain closed.

Disney Cruise Line posted a YouTube video titled *The Significance of Doors in 'Frozen, A Musical Spectacular'* (Disney Cruise Line, 2016), where they discuss the theatrical production of *Frozen* on the Disney Dream cruise ship. The video states that doors are 'A great metaphor for the story of *Frozen*, doors closing in your face and becoming a barrier to what is on the other side.' The choice to keep doors and windows closed shows the emphasis made by Disney to depict the separation of the two sisters, where there is a literal physical division between them. In addition, they assert how all of the lyrics in the songs featured throughout

the films tie back to the theme of doors opening and closing. This emphasises the sister's relationship throughout the film but draws explicit attention to Elsa's isolation which causes their relationship to suffer.

During 'Let It Go,' Elsa transforms her appearance to match her newfound confidence and self-acceptance. Elsa is now living with and using her powers confidently rather than concealing them. This allows her to be empowered and confident in herself. In this scene, Elsa transforms her kingdom of isolation into a palace of empowerment. However, this is not done for the audience but for Elsa herself, as she does not have to hide her true self or try to pass as normal anymore. In the final shot of this scene, she confidently makes direct eye contact with the audience before slamming the palace doors, shutting out the audience, Anna and the rest of society. When Elsa slams the palace doors, it demonstrates that she is isolated from the world, similar to the closed door used to represent the separation of Anna and Elsa in the 'Do You Want to Build a Snowman?' scene. But this time, it is Elsa's choice to do so rather than being forced into it by her parents. Although Ayo (2022) argues that the creation of Elsa's ice palace is a repeat of what her parents taught her, I would contend that it is much more encouraging than her initial isolation because it demonstrates Elsa's acceptance of herself. The isolation she endured over the years was a result of the judgement from her parents and society. By constructing her own ice palace, we can see that Elsa is finally independent and can live with and accept her true self without hiding her powers.

Indeed, Feder (2014) claims that Elsa's slamming of the door demonstrates a progression in the Disney Princess franchise. She states, 'It is important to consider how Elsa transcends the previous princess character by daring to slam the door in the audience's perceptions of her' and further asserts that this progression is demonstrated by Elsa

'acknowledging her flaws and embracing her differences' (Feder, 2014, para. 13). Furthermore, Mollet (2020) notes, for the first time, 'She is content with only having to satisfy her own desires' (p. 127). This aligns with the affirmation model of disability, where an individual's disability or difference can be embraced and celebrated (Cameron, 2014b). As Alice and Ellis (2021) claim, the affirmation model supports the definition of disability as a social construct but also subverts the dominant view of disability or impairment as negative. I would argue that Elsa's journey aligns with these two models. As the film follows Elsa's journey, she encounters societal judgement and treatment towards her powers when she is isolated throughout her childhood which exemplifies the social model in action. In doing so, *Frozen* provides a didactic story of how not to treat others who are different. However, by the film's end, the affirmation model can be identified when Elsa is accepted by others living *with* her powers, and thus, her disability is celebrated.

The motif of doors also appears in Anna's duet with Prince Hans 'Love is an Open Door' when Anna sings, 'All my life has been a series of doors in my face, and then suddenly I bump into you.' This references her childhood and the years she spent trying to communicate with Elsa through her bedroom door. Moreover, the song's title refers to an open door; Anna and Hans sing about their romance as an open door, illustrating that their partnership is a chance for a new beginning in their lives. This is particularly emphasised from Anna's perspective as she refers to the closed doors in her life to illustrate that she is now looking for an open door full of opportunity and adventure. Later in the film, when Anna finds Elsa's ice palace on the North Mountain, she is about to knock on the door to the palace but hesitates. When she does so, Olaf the snowman – the sidekick in the film as identified in the Classic Disney Model - notices and tells her to 'just knock' and asks Kristoff, 'Why isn't she knocking?' and 'Do you think she knows how to knock?' This moment

for Anna, who is hesitant at knocking on the palace doors, depicts the déjà vu she is experiencing, reminding the audience of the connection between doors and the sister's relationship. The hesitation is due to Anna knowing that she knocked on Elsa's door for years but never got any answer. In addition, she was never told about Elsa's powers which were the cause of the isolation. Consequently, now that Anna has seen Elsa's powers for the first time after she accidentally unleashed ice at the coronation, she has an answer as to why Elsa was isolated throughout their childhood. When she knocks, she thinks about the past but hopes Elsa will open the door and open up to her. The use of a door in this scene is powerful as it signifies the actual impact of the separation on Anna. After the hesitation, she knocks on the door, demonstrating her ability to put the past behind her and focus on the present. After knocking, the doors automatically open. Anna gasps, 'Huh, it opened,' and laughs, 'That's a first.' This short scene, Olaf's comments about Anna knocking and Anna's reaction to the door opening provides an element of humour to the motif of doors and isolation. This is something that the film does well, as highlighted by several scholars who claim that *Frozen* can be self-critical and adopt a modern storytelling approach which subverts many traditional fairy tale conventions and characteristics of the Revised and Classic Disney Models (Halsall, 2019; Law, 2014; Wasko, 2020).

### **7.3.5 Queer Aspects of Elsa: Queer, Disabled Body**

It can be argued that *Frozen* is progressive in portraying female characters, gender and the concept of true love (Arnold et al., 2015; Law, 2014; Mollet, 2020). In addition, there is progress regarding aspects of disability, including identity, difference and self-confidence. In *Frozen*, Elsa is treated negatively because of her powers. As a result, she conceals her powers, but in doing so, she is an outcast. And it is only when she embraces her powers and true identity - by letting go of people's



judgement - that she feels confident in herself. In addition, *Frozen* is Disney's first princess film where the main protagonist is not concerned with attaining true love or marriage. Instead, the film focuses predominantly on the relationship between the two sisters. However, Anna compensates for Elsa's lack of romantic desire with the love triangle between Prince Hans and Kristoff, emphasising heteronormativity even if it is in the secondary narrative arc (Law, 2014; Streiff & Dundes, 2017). Nevertheless, because of this, fans have read Elsa as a queer character. Indeed, I would argue that Elsa can be read as a representation of disability *and* queerness. Pugh (2008) defines queerness by stating:

Queerness bears a double meaning in the studies of children's literature, in that these fictions often depict a world where oddness - which can be understood as asexual queerness - is embraced as a chief narrative value. In other usages queerness carries a sexual denotation referring to sexual identities resistant to ideological normativity. (p. 218)

This is further emphasised by Perea (2018), who claims that 'queerness is not exclusively about details surrounding sexual relations, or how you present your gender. It is about many other things - outsider identity markers that change with time in a social structure that shapes our identities through performativity' (p. 8). Elsa's queerness can be viewed in both ways. Firstly, she is not given a love interest; instead, her narrative arc focuses on self-acceptance (Mittermeier, 2021). Because she was born with powers that make her different, she is marked with an outsider identity and an outcast. Perea (2018) argues that the representation of otherness relates to the Queer identity through her analysis of two Disney films, *Dumbo* and *Lilo & Stitch*, where she asserts that the outsider identity is relatable to anyone who has experienced otherness. In addition, she states, 'My queer read on these films does not

claim these signifiers as exclusively queer, nor does it claim queer identity on all who experience outsidersness' (p. 7). Instead, she asserts how specific narratives can 'touch queerness' and consequently create similar readings that Queer critique from within a Disney culture industry product' (Perea, 2018, p. 7).

In addition, Llompart and Brugué (2020) present an argument for Elsa as queer in their article *The Snow Queer? Female Characterization in Walt Disney's Frozen*. They claim that the Disney adaptation is less daring than Andersen's original when portraying non-normative depictions of love and feminism. But ultimately, Elsa can be read as a queer character because 'she has been born with something that makes her special and different from everyone else' (p. 104). In addition, because Elsa's journey does not involve romantic love and thus, her sexual orientation is never discussed or labelled, 'her queerness can also be read as sexual queerness' (Llompart and Brugué, 2020, p. 105). This is further claimed by Mittermeier (2021) who states, 'Elsa is easily the most obviously queer-coded heroine in Disney's princess films' (para 1). Moreover, as *Let It Go* has been described as an anthem of self-acceptance, scholars have also claimed it as a queer anthem (Llompart & Brugué, 2020) because Elsa transforms herself and lives without barriers, binaries or labels. Nevertheless, because there is no explicit reference to Elsa's sexuality as straight or queer, she remains queer-coded, 'existing in a long line of queer-coded, animated Disney characters' (Mittermeier, 2021, para. 12).

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have analysed Vanellope von Schweetz in *Wreck-It Ralph* and Elsa in *Frozen* to show how disability is encoded as a magical power. Both portrayals demonstrate how the character's powers are treated negatively and as a result, they become isolated, excluded and disabled by others. Their journeys throughout the films illustrate

experiences that draw parallels with the social and affirmation models of disability. At first, they are isolated because of the treatment of their powers, but by the film's end, they are accepted and celebrated. However, as Llompart and Brugué (2020) argue, we should not forget that at the end of *Frozen*, Elsa's powers are only accepted after she can control them. Her ice powers were condemned when she used them for defence, but now that she can make beautiful ice decorations for the town of Arendelle, everyone accepts her. Indeed, this is also the case for Vanellope, who is only accepted as a glitch once the game has reset and the players remember she is the main character in the game. Nevertheless, I believe the two films demonstrate progressive portrayals of disability that show real-life attitudes and experiences of disability.

## 8. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have critically analysed the representation of disability in Disney animated films (1937 – 2016). The research questions aimed to find out how many characters had an impairment and/or disability in Disney animated films, how impairment and disability are represented and if there were any changes over time. The content analysis has revealed a wide range of characters with impairments and disability in Disney animated films from the 1930s through to the 2010s. In addition, the film analysis of select films has drawn attention to the numerous ways in which disability is portrayed through the models and theories from disability studies. The main findings show that impairment and disability are frequently used as a sign of evil. The data shows a gender divide where male villains have physical impairments and female villains have traits associated with mental impairments. There is progress, however, with the example of John Silver who develops from a villain into an anti-villain because he possesses more heroic traits than villainous ones. In addition, Silver addresses his impairment effects which provides a more realistic depiction of a cyborg. Furthermore, the live-action retelling of *Maleficent* demonstrates Disney's ability to improve its representation of disability by providing a backstory to the female villain Maleficent. From this, disability is shown as a social construct and Maleficent develops into a sympathetic character.

Another major finding is how impairment is used as a problem that must be overcome, a viewpoint which is rooted in ableism. This was found in *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Little Mermaid* where the characters the Beast and Ariel overcome their temporary impairment to return to normal and gain a romantic happy ending. There is progression with the example of Quasimodo who does not require a transformation and is accepted by the end of the film in his non-normative state. However, Disney does not

provide a romantic happy ending for him in contrast to the Beast and Ariel, with the only difference between the characters being physical impairment. I have argued that *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* focuses on Quasimodo's physical impairment through the treatment by the villain to show how this treatment is bad. This was also a theme I explored in *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen*, where I have argued that these two films align with the social model and affirmation models of disability to provide a realistic depiction of disability caused by societal barriers including negative attitudes and treatment from others. By the end of these two films, the characters do not have to overcome or get rid of their powers but are accepted by others. Overall, my findings show that there is an improvement in the portrayal of disability in Disney animated films across the decades which moves from traditional stereotypical depictions towards more realistic, progressive and affirmative representation.

The improvement of disability representation over time in Disney animated films from stereotypical to more progressive also relates to the models of disability. The developments from viewing disability as an individual and medical problem as illustrated in the medical model of disability to the social and affirmation models where disability is caused by barriers in society and accepted as a positive identity respectively follow similar correlations to the progress in Disney films demonstrating an upward trajectory of positive representation and understanding of disability as caused by society. The correlation between the models and the representation in the films throughout the eras of Disney reflect a view of the world in the period in history when they were made or the time period they refer to. This is encouraging as it shows that the representation of disability has improved over time following similar patterns of the developments in disability studies which moved from medical views of disability towards social construction and affirmative

acceptance. From this, I believe the findings of this research demonstrate the applicability of the models of disability as frameworks for film analysis, and specifically that the correlation between the models and the representations themselves changes and improves over time.

In terms of Disney as a global conglomeration, it is evident that they are making changes and improvements to the representation in their products and content to become more diverse and inclusive. As I have argued, there are examples where the representation of disability has improved, however, a lot more can be done to provide more accurate representations that reflect the lived experiences of disability. The use of the models of disability as frameworks and perspectives when creating and developing characters and narratives is one recommendation I believe would benefit Disney. For example, the studio could adopt the social model of disability and work with disabled people and disability advocacy groups to be informed by those with lived experiences on how stories about disability should be told.

### **8.1 The Representation of Disability in Disney Animated Films: Progression or Critical Reading?**

From the findings of this research, I have shown that there is progress in the representation of disability in Disney animated films. And I would argue that Disney is moving away from traditional and stereotypical portrayals of disability. However, my findings have revealed that a critical disability studies reading may be required to identify these progressive disability narratives. This result is twofold: firstly, it stresses the importance of disability studies for critical analysis and identifying cultural representation of disability that may go unnoticed otherwise. And secondly, it also shows that there are not many explicit representations of disability in Disney animated films that are positive. Therefore, I question

whether these are progressive enough if we always have to read between the lines to uncover hidden messages of disability and read disability into fantasy narratives where it may be encoded as such. For example, as I have discussed in chapter seven, Elsa has magic ice powers in *Frozen* but the treatment by society and specifically her parents, disables her. However, this is unlikely to be identified by many viewers as a disability, unlike Quasimodo's or Captain Hook's physical impairment which are much more explicit. Thus, if we have to read disability into a narrative, is it positive and progressive? As Leduc (2020) stresses, 'give me a princess in a wheelchair...give me stories where *disability* is synonymous with a different way of seeing the world and a recognition that the world can itself grow as a result of this viewpoint' (p. 235). I agree and question: when will we get an accurate representation of disability that is ordinary and part of a character's life without being a problem to overcome? For instance, can we get a story where a disabled character can be part of society *and* have a romantic relationship?

Moreover, I have argued that Elsa is a positive and progressive representation of disability. In particular, she subverts narrative prosthesis by taking off her gloves that are used to conceal her powers and embraces her true identity. In addition, the development from villain to hero allows her story to progress without relying on her powers as the sole reason for her characterisation. So yes, it is a step in the right direction towards a progressive portrayal of disability as a social and cultural construct. Nevertheless, Elsa is not an explicit universal depiction of disability and as a result, may not be recognised as one. It is likely only to be considered one by viewers who can relate to Elsa's story and experiences because they have experienced similar negative treatment due to their own impairment, or when the film is analysed through the lens of disability studies. Nevertheless, I hope that this is a step in the

right direction towards depicting disability as a lived experience and part of a character's identity for Disney.

## **8.2 Contribution to the Field of Disability Studies and Disney Studies**

This research contributes to the fields of disability studies and Disney studies and has been, from the start, actively interdisciplinary. I set out in the introduction and literature review the key reasons for why the two fields are important not only as academic disciplines on their own but also when working interdisciplinary. I believe I am making an original and valuable contribution to both fields by combining theory from disability studies with methodologies from Disney studies demonstrating the importance of both fields. Therefore, the interdisciplinary nature of this research is crucial to progress analysis in both fields.

One of the key contributions from this research is the rigorous codebook I developed which can be used in future studies in the field of disability studies to analyse representations of impairment and disability. When utilised, the codebook not only allows the researcher to identify and count the frequency of impairment but also contextualise how disability is created, constructed and represented. This is key to the field of disability studies which developed from the beliefs of the social model of disability, where disability is a social construct. Therefore, by using this codebook when analysing representations, scholars can identify disabling narratives and explore the ways in which disability is portrayed.

The models of disability, specifically the medical, social, affirmation and cultural, have been used as frameworks to analyse the films. By engaging with the models throughout my analysis, I demonstrate the value of the models for contextualising the experience of disability in cultural representations. In addition, my research demonstrates the



applicability of the models for the analysis of representation in Disney films over time which addresses research question 3: 'have these representations changed over time?' and 3a: 'if so, how?'. The models of disability not only provide a useful framework for analysing changes over time but also follow a similar trajectory as the representation of disability itself which improves over time moving from medical to social and affirmative perspectives. As well as demonstrating how the models can be utilised in film analysis to reveal disability narratives, I have also utilised other disability theory that works alongside the models of disability to reveal and contextualise disability narratives enriching our understanding of disability and contributing to disability studies research. For instance, the development of impairment effects by Carol Thomas (1999) enhanced the social model of disability and has allowed scholars to identify and discuss their own experiences of impairment alongside societal barriers. And I would argue that I have shown how impairment effects can be used as an extension of the social model of disability when identifying realistic portrayals in films.

For the field of Disney studies, the literature review demonstrates that scholars have been analysing Disney films since they were first created and released in the 1930s. In recent decades, Disney studies has flourished with scholars analysing Disney products from a range of critical perspectives. Representation has been of particular focus with many studies analysing gender, race, sexuality, age, family and death. However, disability is still given less attention and consideration than other protected characteristics. It was important, then, to express the value of analysing Disney animated films through the lens of disability studies. I believe throughout this thesis I have demonstrated the usefulness and importance of interdisciplinary research, highlighting how both fields can contribute to one another to enrich the research findings.

### **8.3 Limitations**

The main limitation of this study is the distinction between impairment and disability that I make throughout this thesis. The binary of impairment and disability remains tricky and complex as it is subjective and open to interpretation. For the film analysis conducted in this study, it was often difficult when identifying characters with impairments *and* disability. This was because at times, it felt like I was diagnosing characters with specific medical conditions and labels. Therefore, during the coding and analysis process, I made sure I continued to read relevant literature and similar studies that interpreted disability in literature and film from a critical disability studies perspective. I also coded and made notes of characters who had implicit representations of disability as well as explicit impairments that were easily identifiable. For the more implicit depictions which required detailed interpretation, I made sure that I understood the narrative in which the character became disabled to give as much context as possible. Nevertheless, although this is a limitation, I also believe this is a contribution to the field of disability studies. In disability studies, the binary of impairment and disability remains a key argument. I hope that the use of impairment and disability throughout this thesis demonstrates how they can be used from a disability studies perspective in a useful way which shows the applicability of the social model of disability and contributes to the discourse on these terms.

### **8.4 Recommendations for Future Research**

This research has focused on the representation of impairment and disability in Disney animated films from the perspective of disability studies. This perspective was imperative to uncover the wide range of representations that often go unnoticed. My research was limited to Disney animated films; however, it would be interesting to look at and

compare this analysis with Pixar animated films. Although the Walt Disney Company owns the Pixar Animation Studios, they work as a subsidiary and produce their own films with different styles of animation and storytelling. They have also created more progressive portrayals of disability that provide explicit depictions of impairment and disability, including films such as *Finding Nemo* and *Luca*, where disability is part of a character's identity and story but is not relied upon as a plot device like in older classic Disney films. In addition, my research was limited to empirical qualitative textual analysis, however, participatory research would benefit future research. A study that engaged with disabled people, disability studies scholars, Disney fans and/or Disney studies scholars would provide fruitful insight into the different perspectives of disability in Disney animated films. Furthermore, I have only focused on animated films, but a vast range of Disney products could be analysed similarly. Finally, I am also very interested in the Disney theme parks and accessibility. Therefore, conducting a critical analysis of the accessibility of Disney theme parks through autoethnography as well as qualitative research with disabled Disney fans would provide insight into their perspectives on how they access the parks and provide a greater picture on how accessible Disney is for disabled fans.

## **8.5 Final Thoughts**

Certainly, it seems obvious that disability is portrayed in traditional and stereotypical ways in many Disney animated films. What I found after working on this project for over 3 years is that these films offer limited images of disability often relating to normalcy, the perfect body, good versus bad, and overcoming. The images in these films teach viewers very specific ways of conceptualising disability including how to react to someone with an impairment, how to feel if you become impaired and overwhelmingly, that impairment is associated with being bad. This is also

reinforced through other aspects of representation such as gender and sexuality where the classic Disney model promotes heterosexuality, able-bodiedness and gender norms. I believe that Disney films and Disney products more generally, play a crucial role in shaping audiences, and particularly children's, conceptions of the world. Therefore, the depictions that appear in Disney films need to be consistently critically analysed through a range of perspectives to reveal the messages they can convey.

Disability studies allow readings of disability as a social construct, beyond simplistic depictions of impairment, to show how societal barriers play a role in disabling people who are different. This viewpoint has been crucial to this study and has allowed me to uncover a wider range of disability narratives in Disney animated films. I have reflected on my position as a researcher throughout my studies and within this thesis, and I am confident that this reading provides a useful insight into how disability narratives are portrayed in Disney animated films. This is particularly prominent in the films where characters have magical powers and are treated negatively but this may require a specific understanding or reading of disability through the social model or affirmation models of disability. I do believe that there are more transgressive representations of disability and, in general, the films are becoming more diverse and inclusive. For disability representation in Disney specifically, there are more progressive depictions of disability, which I have explored with examples of *Wreck-It Ralph* and *Frozen*. However, I wonder whether these representations require the critical lens of disability studies or the experience of disability to be fully understood and recognised. Nevertheless, I am confident that there has been improvement over time, and I hope that this continues so that disabled people are accurately represented in the world of Disney.

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Sharpsteen, B. (Director) (1941) *Dumbo* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Hand, D. (Director) (1942) *Bambi* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Ferguson, N., Jackson, W., Kinney, J., Luske, H., & Roberts, B. (Directors) (1942) *Saludos Amigos* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Ferguson, N. (Director) (1944) *The Three Caballeros* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

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Kinney, J., Roberts, B., Luske, H., & Morgan, W. (Directors) (1947) *Fun and Fancy Free* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Geronimi, C., Jackson, W., Luske, H., & Kinney, M. (Directors) (1947) *Melody Time* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Kinney, J., Geronimi, C., & Algar, J. (Directors) (1949) *The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Luske, H., Jackson, W., & Geronimi, C. (Directors) (1950) *Cinderella* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Geronimi, C., Jackson, W., & Luske, H. (Directors) (1951) *Alice in Wonderland* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

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Geronimi, C., Reitherman, W., Larson, E., & Clark, L. (Directors) (1959) *Sleeping Beauty* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

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Reitherman, W. (Director) (1963) *The Sword in the Stone* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Reitherman, W. (Director) (1967) *The Jungle Book* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Reitherman, W. (Director) (1970) *The Aristocats* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Reitherman, W. (Director) (1973) *Robin Hood* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Lounsbery, J., & Reitherman, W. (Directors) (1977) *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Reitherman, W., Lounsbery, J., & Stevens, A. (Directors) (1977) *The Rescuers* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Berman, T., Rich, R. & Stevens, A. (Directors) (1981) *The Fox and the Hound* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Berman, T., & Rich, R. (Directors) (1985) *The Black Cauldron* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions.

Musker, J., Clements, R., Michener, D., & Mattinson (Directors) (1986) *The Great Mouse Detective* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Scribner, G. (Director) (1988) *Oliver & Company* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Musker, J., & Clements, R. (Directors) (1989) *The Little Mermaid* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Butoy, H., & Gabriel, M. (Directors) (1990) *The Rescuers Down Under* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Trousdale, G., & Wise, K. (Directors) (1991) *Beauty and the Beast* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Musker, J., & Clements, R. (Directors) (1992) *Aladdin* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Allers, R., & Minkoff, R. (Directors) (1994) *The Lion King* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Gabriel, M., & Goldberg, E. (Directors) (1995) *Pocahontas* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Trousdale, G., & Wise, K. (Directors) (1996) *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Musker, J., & Clements, R. (Directors) (1997) *Hercules* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.



Cook, B., & Bancroft, T. (Directors) (1997) *Mulan* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Lima, K., & Buck, C. (Directors) (1999) *Tarzan* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Hahn, D., Hunt, P., Butoy, H., Goldberg, E., Algar., Glebas, F., Brizzi, P., & Brizzi, G. (Directors) (1999) *Fantasia 2000* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Zondag, R., & Leighton, E. (Directors) (2000) *Dinosaur* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Dindal, M. (Director) (2000) *The Emperor's New Groove* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Trousdale, G., & Wise, K. (Directors) (2001) *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Sanders, C., & DeBlois (Directors) (2002) *Lilo & Stitch* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Musker, J., & Clements, R. (Directors) (2002) *Treasure Planet* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Blaise, A., & Walker, R. (Directors) (2002) *Brother Bear* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Finn, W., & Sanford, J. (Directors) (2004) *Home on the Range* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Dindal, M. (Director) (2005) *Chicken Little* [Film]. Walt Disney Feature Animation.

Anderson, S. (Director) (2007) *Meet the Robinsons* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Williams, C., & Howard, B. (Directors) (2008) *Bolt* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Musker, J., & Clements, R. (Directors) (2009) *The Princess and the Frog* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Grenouillet, N., & Howard, B. (Directors) (2010) *Tangled* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Anderson, S., & Hall, D. (Directors) (2011) *Winnie the Pooh* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Moore, R. (Director) (2012) *Wreck-It Ralph* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Buck, C., & Lee, J. (Directors) (2013) *Frozen* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Hall, D., & Williams, C. (Directors) (2014) *Big Hero 6* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Stromberg, R. (Director) (2014) *Maleficent* [Film]. Walt Disney Productions

Howard, B., & Moore, R. (Directors) (2016) *Zootopia* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.

Musker, J., & Clements, R. (Directors) (2016) *Moana* [Film]. Walt Disney Animation Studios.