

Viewing the Disney Movie *Frozen* through a Psychodynamic Lens

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Abstract The Disney movie *Frozen* is the fifth highest grossing movie of all time. In order to better understand this phenomenon and to hypothesize as to why the movie resonated so strongly with audiences, we have interpreted the movie using psychodynamic theory. We pay particular attention to the themes of puberty, adolescence and sibling relationships and discuss examples of ego defenses that are employed by the lead character in relation to these concepts.

Keywords Disney · psychodynamic theory · child development · adolescence

Many academics have written about the meaning of fairy tales, both in a sociological sense and in a psychological one (Zipes 2012, Von Frank 1971). From a psychological perspective, fairy tales play an important part in the emotional development of children. Through them, children are able to explore their internal self and, in doing so, begin to understand the complexities of their external world.

In his seminal work *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim purports that fairy tales speak not only to our conscious mind but also to our unconscious one (Bettleheim 1976). Such stories offer “conscious credence and body to id pressures” whilst also directly encouraging the development of the “budding ego.” They allow us to acknowledge the dynamic conflicts between the desires of the unconscious id, dominated by the “pleasure principle,” and those of the superego, which is governed, in part, by external world requirements. These conflicts are often managed within ourselves by the employment of ego defenses. Typical examples of these, and ones that are often experimented with during development, include: splitting (the psychological failure to integrate the positive and negative aspects of the self); projection (the

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externalization and attribution of negative feelings and urges to others); acting out (performing an action that is generally destructive to self or others); and repression (the unconscious suppression of undesirable feelings).

According to psychodynamic theory, identification of these defenses and the “working through” of the conflicts from which they arise is an important part of resolving intrapsychic distress. By demonstrating such complex psychological concepts in literal terms, fairy tales not only raise our awareness of these dynamic conflicts but also give us ideas of how we might negotiate them.

The Disney movie *Frozen*, released in 2013, has, at the time of this writing, grossed in excess of \$1.2 billion, making it the fifth highest grossing movie of all time (BBC News online 2014). Originally based on Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tale, “The Snow Queen” (Anderson 1914), the writers adapted the story so that the central theme became that of the bond between two sisters, both princesses of the kingdom of Arendelle and orphans after their parents are lost at sea. Elsa, the elder, more self-controlled sister, has the power to create snow and ice at will – a fact that she is forced to hide during her childhood before it ultimately comes to light at her coronation. Anna, the more naïve, younger sister, is presented as an impulsive, extrovert character in contrast to Elsa. When Elsa flees the kingdom, fearful of her uncontrollable powers, Anna sets off, with the help of Kristoff, an ice salesman, to bring her sister back to civilization and persuade her to withdraw the eternal winter that she has unwittingly inflicted on Arendelle.

Critically, *Frozen* received lukewarm reviews when it was first released (Foundas 2013). However, when distributed to the general public, the movie became a global success and continues to be a sociological phenomenon with a generation of children devoted to all things *Frozen*. Elsa’s central song, “Let It Go,” won the Academy Award for Best Original Song and has already become well-embedded in the public consciousness.

In this article, we examine the movie through a psychodynamic lens so as to better understand why it resonates so strongly with children and, indeed, adults. We pay particular attention to Elsa’s transformation from an unconfident, young woman ashamed of her gifts into a strong-willed character in command of her powers. We examine this transformation as a metaphor for the ordeals of puberty and adolescence and identify the psychological defenses that Elsa employs to cope. These exemplify those used by adolescents in general during this period. Finally, we examine the complex and ambivalent nature of Anna and Elsa’s relationship, which children experiencing similar dilemmas with which their own siblings will, no doubt, identify.

While some authors have resisted a purely psychodynamic interpretation of the meaning of fairy tales, framing their significance in a cultural and sociological light (Zipes 2006), this piece is more interested in considering the ways in which the psychodynamic ideas contained within *Frozen* might reflect key aspects of the emotional development of its target audience.

“The fears that once controlled me”

From a young age, children have an awareness of their need to grow up into adults. This awareness evokes significant anxiety. Similarly, the *process* of growing up itself brings with it many anxieties – from the child’s fear of her parents dying to the fear evoked by the aggressive urges that we gradually become conscious of and that form a normal and integral part of our psyche. When Elsa sings of the “fears that once controlled me,” she might be singing for any

member of the audience, and this concept acts as a strongly unifying idea. In adolescence, these “fears” often revolve around social situations and others’ perceptions of them – with fears of being humiliated or of not fitting in being pervasive. Other fears include the fear of our inherent capacity for destruction which, in Elsa’s case, seems particularly pertinent.

Indeed, Elsa’s journey in the movie closely mirrors the requirements that children must navigate in adolescence. This process involves a complex shift on the child’s part from the infantile to the adult self. It requires the re-structuring of one’s personality along with the development of a stable self-identity, all the while tolerating the major physical and emotional changes that are taking place during puberty - the “swirling storm inside” that Elsa sings of. This difficult transition brings with it “excessively disturbing...or disruptive states of mind” (Waddell 2002), which must be contained and managed by the young person. This is achieved, in part, through psychodynamic defenses, some of which are more functional than others. Adolescents will typically employ a variety of these mechanisms in their attempts to manage difficult feelings.

As well as struggling to come to terms with the emotional turmoil of puberty, adolescence, and, indeed, sexual development, Elsa must also negotiate her chaotic magical powers *and* assume the very adult responsibility of ruling a kingdom. By the end of the movie, she appears to have successfully navigated all these requirements, but the process is not smooth. Over the course of the movie, she employs repression, isolation, splitting, projection and acting out as a means of coping with the various demands on her. This, too, reflects the processes that adolescents themselves may attempt.

“Be the good girl you always have to be”

At the beginning of the movie, we see Elsa as a “good” and dutiful girl. During her coronation, she strives to maintain the semblance of composure and level-headedness:

Don’t let them in, don’t let them see.
Be the good girl you always have to be.
Conceal. Don’t feel. Don’t let them know.

Here Elsa *deliberately* suppresses her emotions, and indeed her powers, in order to perform the functions required of her. The reality that becomes clear, however, is that underneath the external composure lies a host of unconsciously repressed feelings struggling to surface.

Indeed, when Anna tells her that she plans to marry Hans, a man she has known for only a short time, Elsa’s repressed feelings *do* surface - exploding in the form of icy shards and snow storms. Here, she begins to externalise the inner turmoil she has thus far strived so hard to deny. In the adolescent, there is a similar tendency towards the expulsion of psychic pain as opposed to the containment of it (which is often too difficult for a young person to maintain). Such expulsion might be manifest in several ways – one of which is acting out.

Acting out can be either directed inwardly – as in the case of self-harm – or externally – for example, in the wilful destruction of property. The “accidental” ice shards that Elsa propels outwards to keep others away are a clear example of such externally-directed acting out. Indeed, this episode further demonstrates another characteristic of adolescent behaviour – its impulsive, (seemingly) uncontrollable and emotionally dysregulated nature. Children who may be conscious of their own rageful and aggressive urges but not yet able to fully make

sense of them may experience considerable vicarious satisfaction in watching Elsa behave in this manner.

“Let it go! Let it go!”

Any parent of an adolescent will be familiar with another defense that Elsa employs following on from this episode - namely isolation. In the same way that teenagers might lock themselves away in their bedrooms, so too does Elsa impose her own “kingdom of isolation” on the remote North Mountain. She experiments with her magical powers and further attempts to find ways to manage her psychic pain, this time with splitting - the division of the self (and indeed others) into purely “good” or “bad.” By splitting, individuals are able to deny negative aspects of the self. These aspects are often projected onto others. In Elsa’s case, this projection is represented by her having created not only Olaf, the lovable and humorous snowman, who might be said to contain all her “good” qualities, but also the ice monster that forcibly removes Anna from the ice palace – a violent and frightening creation that characterizes Elsa’s “bad” qualities.

Along with experimenting with psychological means of managing distress, Elsa’s subsequent transformation mirrors the other types of experimentation that adolescents engage in. These include the testing of societal and parental boundaries and rules, as well as experimentation with their own bodies:

It's time to see what I can do,
to test the limits and break through.
No right, no wrong, no rules for me.
I'm free.

When Elsa goes on to sing that she no longer cares what others think of her, she appears to have been freed from the social anxiety she felt at the beginning of the movie. This liberation is incredibly attractive for audiences:

I don't care what they're going to say.
Let the storm rage on.
The cold never bothered me anyway.

Through this, Elsa recognises that “that perfect girl is gone” – something that many girls in the audience may wish to be able to say themselves.

Elsa’s central scene in the movie could be seen as a cathartic release from all the anxieties and restraints that she, and society, had placed on her as well as the intrapsychic conflicts she has thus far laboured under:

Let it go, let it go!
Can't hold it back any more.
Let it go, let it go!

At the same time, we witness the embracement of her sexuality and femininity - she lets down her hair and changes out of her restrictive wardrobe into a revealing, figure-hugging dress. Along with increased aggressive drives, adolescence brings increased sexual thoughts and urges. It is important that *Frozen* depicts a healthy recognition of this. For Elsa, sexuality becomes something to be embraced not feared. This will be significant to audiences who might themselves be terrified of the concept of sexuality.

There is, of course, considerable debate about the way in which Disney has historically portrayed its female heroines in this regard, with authors highlighting the patriarchal perpetuation of impossible standards of beauty as well as the fact that many heroines actually “possess little agency” (Feder 2014). In Elsa, though, there is a sense that Disney has created a more nuanced female role model – one whom is representative of a more modern view of female sexuality and self-concept.

“We used to be best buddies...and now we’re not”

Alongside Elsa’s personal journey in the movie, we witness the development of hers and Anna’s relationship. Initially, they are portrayed as extremely close, as in the song, “Do you want to build a snowman?”. Following an accident in which Anna is struck unconscious by Elsa’s magic, the two are isolated from one another with Elsa locked away in her bedroom to keep others safe. During this separation, it could be argued that Elsa begins to develop unconscious, envious feelings towards Anna – not only due to her position as the youngest in the family and her greater access to and attention from, their parents but also due to the fact that Anna is “normal” and “uncursed.”

Such envy is reflected in the manner in which Elsa later relates to Anna. Not only does she enforce emotional distancing during their childhood but she later attempts to exert control over Anna as well, forbidding her to marry Hans at the coronation ball. Furthermore, when Anna is later “accidentally” struck by Elsa, leaving her heart frozen, Elsa might be said to be enviously attempting to destroy the very quality in Anna that she herself desires – a warm heart. Of course, in this case, the ambivalence that Elsa feels towards Anna comes to light, as, following this incident, she is wracked with guilt and shame.

Rivalry and envy are a normal aspect of sibling relationships. Many in the audience of *Frozen* will, at the time of viewing, be experiencing exactly such feelings. Over time, as individuals develop their own sense of self and better understanding of their place in the world, they experience reduced conflicts of interest with their siblings, and difficulties in sibling relationships are often resolved. Again, we are shown this in *Frozen*. When Anna decides to sacrifice herself to save her sister from Hans, the act becomes a transformative one. Not only is it the “act of true love” that thaws Anna’s frozen heart, but it is also the means by which the sisters finally reconcile their differences and become close again.

Conclusion

The appeal of *Frozen* might, in part, be attributed to its literal representation of intrapsychic conflicts and ambivalent relationships, and its demonstration of the successful resolution of these. Obviously, the movie is not alone in its depiction of such themes. Countless numbers of narratives from both film and literature have followed a similar path, but perhaps the combination of these themes with *Frozen’s* visuals and songs has lifted it above other such narratives in the public’s mind.

When watching the movie, individuals will relate to characters’ narratives and the themes discussed above in numerous and varied ways. Additionally, for any one individual, the same theme may have different meanings at different stages of their life. An overarching message, that might be said to unite all viewers at all developmental stages, is the hope that they, too,

might overcome their own personal conflicts, in the same way that the characters have successfully overcome theirs.

In particular, *Frozen* reminds us that a means to achieving this resolution might be through family love - the key to both Anna's and Arendelle's thawing.

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