

Question 2: *Using at least three examples, consider how storytellers have utilised film and/or music/sound design to explore at least one of the following: sublime, weird & eerie, transformation conflict, the self, silence, leitmotifs, symbolism, archetypes.*

Name: Demi Mitchell

Student Number: 1906418

Course Title: BA Film and TV

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Lecturer's Name: Rob Jones

How Disney have utilised symbolism in the story and concept of their films.

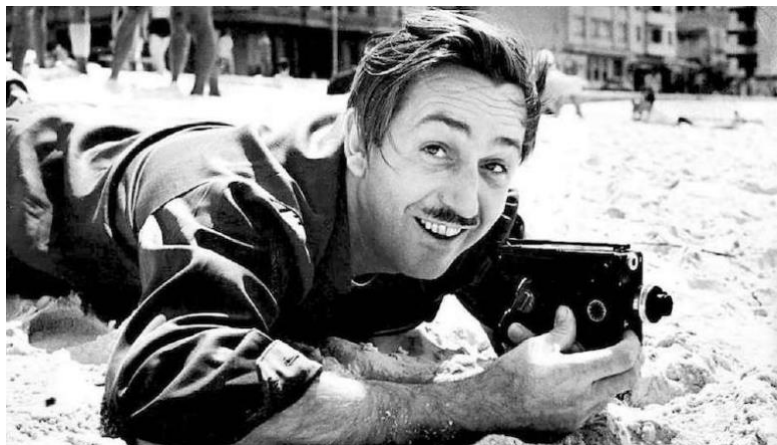
Introduction

In the Collins English dictionary, symbol / symbolism is defined as *“sign or thing that stands for something else” / “representation of something by symbols; movement in art or literature using symbols to express abstract and mystical ideas”* (Collins English dictionary and thesaurus, 1993). Expanding on this in terms of literature, symbolism is the concept of a deeper meaning to something which we would not look into otherwise. Using symbolism in literature can make the difference in the meaning of stories and how they are interpreted by the audience. It adds depth to characters and creates meaningful messages in the story. A film writer who has mastered the use of symbolism is Walt Disney. Walt Disney wrote many Disney classics and used symbolism in all of his work. Disney have continued the legacy of Walt and have continued the use of symbolism in every Disney film made.

In this essay I will take you on a journey of different Disney films. I will discuss how the use of symbolism in these films has encouraged the concepts. I will use examples of three Disney films I feel have used symbolism most effectively in terms of storytelling. Throughout the essay I will analyse my chosen films, the symbolisms used, providing visual examples. I will argue how symbolisms help tell story to the audience. I will conclude on the effectiveness of symbolism in storytelling.

“That’s what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again.” – Walt Disney

(A quote by Walt Disney company (n.d.). Retrieved December 10, 2020 from Goodreads.com)



(Miyamoto, K. (2020, January 6). 15 inspiring Walt Disney quotes for screenwriters - ScreenCraft. Retrieved 10 December 2020, from [Screencraft.org](https://www.screen-craft.org/) website)

Beauty and the Beast (1991)

Beauty and the Beast is an animated Disney film produced 1991. The film centres around a young woman (Belle) considered strange to her village due to her love for books. Belle's father is captured by The Beast, she subsequently volunteers prisoner to save him. The Beast who is a prince was cursed with his servants due to his conceited nature. The curse involved turning a prince to look like a beast to reflect his personality which would only be lifted when the beast fell in love which was reciprocated. The Beast seeks Belle love with the encouragement of his servants. The Beast allows Belle to see her father through the magic mirror, learning of his needs, he releases her. On realisation there is a mob after the Beast, she races back to his castle to save him. As the Beast is wounded the pair confess their love for each-other and the curse is broken.

The concept behind this film is to demonstrate the importance of inner beauty to children. The concept educates the audience of loving the Beast regardless of his physical appearance. Different symbolisms are highlighted which encourage this concept.

A significant symbolism in the enchanted red rose encased in a glass dome which became the film's trademark. In literature, red roses symbolise love and romance; *"Red roses mean passionate love."* (Minter, D. (2017, September 2), The meaning of roses retrieved December 10, 2020 from Owlcation.) The rose is an object which often appears in Vanitas paintings, a genre of paintings popular in Europe from the 16th-18th century. These paintings are filled with different objects which are considered random or pointless but in fact it is these paintings which Beauty and the Beast got most its ideas from. Vanitas paintings are filled with objects such as clocks, candles, mirrors, musical instruments etc. These objects are symbols in this film. These paintings also have many dying flowers, including this red rose. The word 'Vanitas' is Latin for emptiness. This definition along with the objects in the paintings demonstrates the paintings are symbolic of the Beast's life. It also demonstrates how the symbol of the rose can change his life to be more fulfilled.

An additional symbolism from Vanitas paintings is the character Lumiere who was a servant turned into a candle from the curse. When Belle is first imprisoned, the screen is dark. The first thing we see is Lumiere with his flames alight. This instantly symbolises hope for Belle and shows not all is lost. It also represents hope for the Beast in that Belle is his hope for breaking the curse.

A further symbolism highlighted was some of the characters clothing. During the majority of the film Belle is the only character wearing blue clothing. Blue represents Belle's female independence. I recognise blue is typically worn by men to represent their power. Belle being the only character wearing this colour allows her to stand out highlighting she is the main character and the story will revolve around her and her journey.

Disney use blue on a female character to represent a forthcoming journey, on times journeys of self or conflict. This is highlighted in other films such as Cinderella and The Wizard of Oz.

Further to Belle's clothing, I recognise as the film progresses the colour changes from a cool blue tone to a warm golden tone which symbolises a change in her emotions and her becoming happier. Similarly the Beast's clothing also goes through this process where initially his clothes are dark tones, to warmer tones which equally symbolises a change in his emotions and happiness. As these tones change in tandem with one another this symbolises their development of their mutual feelings for one another.

Belle's journey is also represented as she sings the song 'Belle' by Paige O'Hara where she sings *"There must be more than this provincial life."*
(*'Belle'* by Paige O'Hara lyrics – retrieved December 10 2020 from Genius.com website.)

A further symbol in the Vanitas paintings is a mirror. This symbol can be found in the film and is called the magic mirror. The mirror symbolises how lonely and isolated the Beast is from the outside world. This is explained by the narrator;

"Ashamed of his monstrous form, the Beast concealed himself inside his castle, with a magic mirror as his only window to the outside world." – The Narrator
(Prologue – Disney Wiki. Retrieved December 10 2020 from Fandom.com)



(Elsie. (2017, April 13). The hidden vanitas symbolism in disney's Beauty and the Beast - tea and ink society. Retrieved 10 December 2020, from Teaandinksociety.com)

Alice in Wonderland (1951)

Alice in Wonderland is an animated Disney film produced 1951. When a curious young girl follows a white rabbit with a pocket watch she falls down a rabbit hole to a magical wonderland. The land is filled with multiple bizarre characters including a White Rabbit, Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee, a Cheshire Cat, a Mad Hatter and the Queen of Hearts. As Alice journeys through Wonderland, she learns about herself and about what it means to become an adult. After Alice's adventures in Wonderland she awakes on her sister lap.

The concept of the film is growing up from a child to an adolescent and the challenges that follow. This film is about Alice and her dream-like state, the wonderland she has created to help her understand the adult world. Every character or challenge that Alice faces symbolises her developing understanding of adulthood.

The symbolisms displayed in the film demonstrate the concept of growing up. A significant symbolism in the film is Alice's battle with being too big or too small. This is highlighted throughout the film where Alice grows and shrinks never content with her size. The changes in her size symbolises her inability to accept the changes of becoming an adult.

One symbolism highlighted in the film is Alice's blue dress. Disney are well known for using blue on character's dresses when they are about to go through a journey.

Throughout the film Alice meets characters which symbolise her difficulty in becoming an adult. Firstly, the White Rabbit. In literary terms, the White Rabbit is a juxtaposition as he's an animal wearing a waistcoat, holding a pocket watch, contradicting the concept of a beast and a gentleman. This makes Alice curious which leads her to follow the rabbit to the rabbit hole. Throughout the film, Alice is in constant search of the White Rabbit which is symbolises her on-going curiosity about the adult world. This character can also represent the aspect of anxiety which comes with growing up, as the rabbit is always anxious about being late; *"Oh my goodness I'm late"*, which he repeats throughout the film.

Another character which Alice meets is Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee. The duo tell Alice a story of the curious oysters, about the dangers of being curious and what it can lead to. These characters represent adult figures in Alice's life in their attempt to stop her childlike imagination. This is a concept parents often use with their children as they tell them lies to stop them being curious and to get their children to behave.

Alice, further on in the film, comes across a smoking caterpillar. The conversation between Alice and the caterpillar shows us that Alice has lost her sense of identity as she approaches adolescence; *"I can't explain myself sir, for I am not myself you know."* (Alice Meets The caterpillar - Alice In Wonderland (1951). (2017, January 24) Youtube). The caterpillar offers Alice a piece of a magic mushroom in order to solve her growing and shrinking problem. This symbolises the aspect of drugs in adulthood and how Alice may be pressured into this as she

struggles with the challenges of growing up, thinking they may fix her problems, like they fixed her growing and shrinking problem. This scene ends with the caterpillar transforming into a butterfly, another symbolism of growing up from a child to an adult.

We are then presented with the Cheshire cat. The cat speaks in mostly metaphors. Although this may seem confusing to Alice, he is helping her understand adult life by informing her that everyone in wonderland is mad, symbolising that not all adults have life figured out. The cat's use of metaphors in this scene symbolises that life is not always straight-forward and sometimes we have to think carefully about things to understand things. The cat finally helps Alice by pointing her in the direction of the Mad Hatter.

Alice comes across the Mad Hatter at the tea party. He is an absurd character, constantly in a frenzy. This scene symbolises the theme of time. The Hatter explains he and time have had a falling out and time has trapped him at this tea party at the time of 6 o'clock. Time will not move forward unless the Mad Hatter makes up with time. This symbolises Alice's fear of time and highlights that if she is not accepting of time then she cannot grow up and will remain with a constant battle in her mind with herself. Alice's fear of time will cause her not to be able to move on with life, causing her to be stuck in childhood.



(stranger. (2009, May 5). Deeper, hidden meanings and themes in Alice in Wonderland. Retrieved 10 December 2020, from Owlcation)

The Lion King 1994 (500)

The Lion King is an animated Disney film produced 1994. When the Lion King and Queen have a cub (Simba), the kingdom is happy with joy apart from Simba's uncle (Scar). Scar wants to be king himself. When Scar leads the Lion King (Mufasa) and his son Simba to a ravine, Simba falls in and Mufasa attempts to save his son. As Simba climbs to safety, Scar is reluctant to let Mufasa live, pushing him down the ravine resulting in Mufasa's death. As Simba believes he was the cause of this, he leaves the kingdom. He grows up with two friend's he meets called, Timon and Pumbaa. Now grown up, he sees his old friend from the animal kingdom called, Nala. As Simba is led to return to the animal kingdom he realises what Scar has done and knows he must take on Scar to save the kingdom. As Simba defeats Scar he is crowned as the Lion King as his father once was.

The Lion King story is very alike of Shakespeare's Hamlet. Both stories are centred around a main character who has lost a father and both include an uncle who is a villain. In both stories, the uncle also kills his brother so he can be king. The concept of The Lion King is centred around the circle of life. It explores the concept that life and death continue to repeat themselves as a circle.

A significant symbolism of the film is the use of colour. The colour of Scar's fur is significantly darker than other lions. Particularly in comparison to Mufasa's fur which is much lighter. I recognise this highlights the difference of the two characters demonstrating that Scar is the bad character. This is also represented in the hyenas associated with Scar who are dark grey in colour also representing bad. A further colour highlighted is blue, represented within the characters Rafiki, Zazu and Nala, characters associated with Mufasa and Simba. I recognise this symbolises good and their loyalty for Mufasa and Simba. The good and bad characters of the film are clearly represented by differences in colour.

A further colour green is also highlighted in the kingdom at times when Mufasa was king. During this time the animals thrived within the land and were happy. In comparison to this, when Scar became king these colours changed to dark grey where the animals were unhappy and lived in fear. The emotions of joy when Mufasa was king compares to emotions of fear when Scar was king.

On the other hand, we also see green when Scar sings his song 'Be prepared' in his cave. We see these colours in green clouds of smoke and in Scar's eyes which symbolise his envy for Simba.

A further symbolism is the use of elements. At the beginning of the film we see lots of sun and light. This lightness represents the peace and joy in the kingdom. The sun is replaced with clouds and storms when Scar becomes king and Mufasa dies, representing the joy that was Mufasa as king is now gone and the kingdom is sad. Later on we see the element of fire. Fire is shown underneath Simba when at the edge of a cliff before Scar's defeat. The fire

here symbolises the evil in Scar, now being shown to Simba. As he realises, it encourages him to defeat Scar. After the defeat, we see more rain and storms which puts out the fire and symbolises the cleansing of lands from the evil of Scar. This is the rebirth of the land as Simba now takes his place as King.

Water is another significant symbolism. Water symbolises life. We see this as Scar leads Mufasa and Simba to a ravine without water, highlighting that he is taking away the life of Mufasa. We also see the use of water when Timon and Pumbaa see Simba in the desert and use water attempting to revive him, again representing bringing life back to Simba. Rafiki also uses water when he sees Simba fully grown and leads him to the water to see the reflection of his father in himself and says to Simba; *"He lives on in you"* (Themes+Symbols in Lion king. (n.d.). Retrieved December 10, 2020, from Deviantart.com). This represents the meaning of life to Simba as he realises he must return to the kingdom to be King.

Another symbolism in the film is shown at the beginning at Mufasa's death. Mufasa goes to rescue his son Simba who was holding onto a tree branch trying to save himself from the stampede at the ravine. After the incident of Mufasa's death, Mufasa lays under the same branch that Simba held onto, but now broken. This symbolises the death of Mufasa.



(Bacher, H. (2008). The Lion King. In *Dream Worlds* (pp. 66–71). Elsevier.)

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated the importance of symbolism within films. It highlights significant aspects of the story and helps perceive the correct emotions to the audience. Throughout the essay, I have analysed the concepts of love, growing up and life in different films and have provided symbolisms to support this. Through this analysis I have been able to argue that symbolism helps the story concept to be perceived in a clearer way by the audience.

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