

Unlearning the Myths that Bind Us

Critiquing fairy tales and cartoons

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I was nourished on the milk of U.S. culture: I cleaned the dwarves' house and waited for Prince Charming to bring me life; I played Minnie Mouse to Mickey's flower-bearing adoration, and, later, I swooned in Rhett Butler's arms—my waist as narrow and my bosom every bit as heaving as Scarlett's. But my daddy didn't own a plantation; he owned a rough-and-tumble bar frequented by loggers and fishermen. My waist didn't dip into an hourglass; in fact, according to the novels I read, my thick ankles doomed me to be cast as the peasant woman reaping hay while the heroine swept by with her handsome man in hot pursuit.

Our students suckle the same pap. Our society's culture industry colonizes their minds and teaches them how to act, live, and dream. This indoctrination hits young children especially hard. The "secret education," as Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman dubs it, delivered by children's books and movies, instructs young people to accept the world as it is portrayed in these social blueprints. And often that world depicts the domination of one sex, one race, one class, or one country over a weaker counterpart. After studying cartoons and children's literature, my student Omar wrote, "When we read children's books, we aren't just reading cute little stories, we are discovering the tools with which a young society is manipulated." Beverly Tatum, who wrote the book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting To-*



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gether in the Cafeteria?, helps explain how children develop distorted views of people outside of their racial/cultural group:

The impact of racism begins early. Even in our preschool years, we are exposed to misinformation about people different from ourselves. Many of us grow up in neighborhoods where we had limited opportunities to interact with people different from our own families. . . . Consequently, most of the early information we receive about “others”—people racially, religiously, or socioeconomically different from ourselves—does not come as a result of firsthand experience. The secondhand information we receive has often been distorted, shaped by cultural stereotypes, and left incomplete.

Cartoon images, in particular the Disney movie *Peter Pan*, were cited by the children in a research study as their No. 1 source of information. At the age of 3, these children had a set of stereotypes in place.

Children’s cartoons, movies, and literature are perhaps the most influential genre “read.” Young people, unprotected by any intellectual armor, hear or watch these stories again and again, often from the warmth of their mothers’ or fathers’ laps. The messages, or “secret education,” linked with the security of their homes, underscore the power these texts deliver. As Tatum’s research suggests, the stereotypes and worldview embedded in the stories become accepted knowledge.

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I want my students to question this accepted knowledge and the secret education delivered by cartoons as well as by the canon. Because children’s movies and literature are short and visual we can critique them together. We can view many in a brief period of time, so students can begin to see patterns in media portrayals of particular groups and learn to decode the underlying assumptions these movies

make. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote that instead of wrestling with words and ideas, too often students “walk on the words.” If I want my students to wrestle with the social text of novels, news, or history books, they need the tools to critique media that encourage or legitimate social inequality.

To help students uncover those old values planted by Disney, Mattel, and Nike, and construct more just ones, I begin this “unlearning the myths” unit with two objectives. First, I want students to critique portrayals of hierarchy and inequality in children’s movies and cartoons. Then I want to enlist them to imagine a better world, characterized by relationships of respect and equality.

Exposing the Myths: How to Read Cartoons

Prior to watching any cartoons, I ask students to read the second chapter of Dorfman’s book *The Empire’s Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and Other*

Innocent Heroes Do to Our Minds. Students keep track of their responses in a dialogue journal. I pose the question: Do you agree with Dorfman's position that children receive a "secret education" in the media? Do you remember any incidents from your own childhood that support his allegations?"

This is difficult for some students. The dialogue journal spurs them to argue, to talk back, and create a conversation with the writer. Dorfman is controversial. He gets under their skin. He wrote:

Industrially produced fiction has become one of the primary shapers of our emotions and our intellect in the twentieth century. Although these stories are supposed to merely entertain us, they constantly give us a secret education. We are not only taught certain styles of violence, the latest fashions, and sex roles by TV, movies, magazines, and comic strips; we are also taught how to succeed, how to love, how to buy, how to conquer, how to forget the past and suppress the future. We are taught more than anything else, how not to rebel. (p. xxi)

Many students don't want to believe that they have been manipulated by children's media or advertising. No one wants to admit that they've been "handled" by the media. They assure me that they make their own choices and the media has no power over them—as they sit with Fubus, Nikes, Timberlands, or whatever the latest fashion rage might be. And Dorfman analyzes that pose:

There has also been a tendency to avoid scrutinizing these mass media products too closely, to avoid asking the sort of hard questions that can yield disquieting answers. It is not strange that this should be so. The industry itself has declared time and again with great forcefulness that it is innocent, that no hidden motives or implications are lurking behind the cheerful faces it generates. (p. xxi)

Justine, a senior in my Contemporary Literature and Society class, was bothered by Dorfman's quest "to dissect those dreams, the ones that had nourished my childhood and adolescence, that continued to infect so many of my adult habits." In her dialogue journal she responded:

Personally, handling the dissection of dreams has been a major cause of depression for me. Not so much dissecting—but how I react to what is found as a result of the operation. It can be overwhelming and discouraging to find out my whole self-image has been formed mostly by others or underneath my worries about what I look like are years (17 of them) of being exposed to TV images of girls and their set roles given to them by TV and the media. It's painful to deal with. The idea of not being completely responsible for how I feel about things today is scary.

So why dissect the dreams? Why not stay ignorant about them and happy? The reason for me is that those dreams are not unrelated to my everyday life. They influence how I behave, think, react to things. . . . My dreams keep me from dealing with an unpleasant reality.

In looking back through this passage and others in her dialogue with Dorfman, Justine displayed discomfort with prying apart her identity and discovering where she received her ideas; yet, she also grudgingly admitted how necessary this process was if she wanted to move beyond where she was at the time. Her discomfort might also have arisen from feeling incapable of changing herself or changing the standards by which she was judged in the larger society. But she knew such questioning was important.

In a later section of her journal, she wrote, "True death equals a generation living by rules and attitudes they never questioned and producing more children who do the same." Justine's reaction may be more articulate than some, but her sentiments were typical of many students. She was beginning to peel back the veneer covering some of the injustice in our society, and she was dismayed by what she discovered.

Charting Stereotypes

I start by showing students old cartoons because the stereotypes are so blatant. We look at the roles women, men, people of color, and poor people play in the cartoons. I ask students to watch for who plays the lead. Who plays the buffoon? Who plays the servant? I encourage them to look at the race, station in life, body type of each character. What are the characters' motivations? What do they want

out of life? What's their mission? If there are people of color in the film, what do they look like? How are they portrayed? What would children learn about this particular group from this film?

Early in the unit, I show a Popeye cartoon, "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves," which depicts all Arabs with the same face, same turban, same body—and they are all thieves swinging enormous swords.

How does the film portray overweight people? What about

women other than the main character? What jobs do you see them doing? What do they talk about? What are their main concerns? What would young children learn about women's roles in society if they watched this film and believed it? What roles do money, possessions, and power play in the film? Who has it? Who wants it? How important is it to the story? What would children learn about what's important in this society?

As they view each episode, they fill in a chart answering these questions. Students immediately start yelling out the stereotypes because they are so obvious. Early in the unit, I show a Popeye cartoon, "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves," which depicts all Arabs with the same face, same turban, same body—and they



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are all thieves swinging enormous swords. At one point in the cartoon, Popeye clips a dog collar on helpless Olive Oyl and drags her through the desert. Later, the 40 thieves come riding through town stealing everything—food, an old man's teeth, numbers off a clock—even the stripe off a barber pole. The newer cartoons—like *Mulan*, *Aladdin*, and *Pocahontas*—are subtler and take more sophistication to see through, but if students warm up on the old ones, they can pierce the surface of the new ones as well.

On first viewing, students sometimes resist critical analysis. After watching a Donald Duck cartoon, for example, Kamaui said, "This is just a dumb little cartoon with some ducks running around in clothes." Then students start to notice patterns—like the absence of female characters in many of the older cartoons. When women do appear, they look like Jessica Rabbit or *Playboy* centerfolds—even in many of the new and improved children's movies.

After filling in a few charts, collectively and on their own, students write about the generalizations children might take away from these tales. From experience, I've discovered that I need to keep my mouth shut for a while. If I'm the one pointing out the stereotypes, it's the kiss of death to the exercise. Besides, students are quick to find the usual stereotypes on their own: "Look, Ursula the sea witch is ugly and smart. Hey, she's kind of dark looking. The young, pretty ones only want to hook their man; the old, pretty ones are mean because they are losing their looks." Kenneth noticed that people of color and poor people are either absent or servants to the rich, white, pretty people. Tyler pointed out that the roles of men are limited as well. Men must be virile and wield power or be

old and the object of "good-natured" humor. Students began seeing beyond the charts I'd rigged up for them. They looked at how overweight people were portrayed as buffoons in episode after episode. They noted the absence of mothers, the wickedness of stepparents.

Later in the unit, Mira, a senior, attacked the racism in these Saturday morning rituals. She brought her familiarity with Native American cultures into her analysis:

Indians in Looney Tunes are also depicted as inferior human beings. These characters are stereotypical to the greatest degree, carrying tomahawks, painting their faces, and sending smoke signals as their only means of communication. They live in tepees and their language reminds the viewer of Neanderthals. We begin to imagine Indians as savages with bows and arrows and long black braids. There's no room in our minds for knowledge of the differences between tribes, like the Cherokee alphabet or Celilo salmon fishing.

A Black Cinderella?

After viewing a number of cartoons, Kenya scolded parents in an essay, "A Black Cinderella? Give Me A Break." She wrote: "Have you ever seen a Black person, an Asian, a Hispanic in a cartoon? Did they have a leading role or were they a servant? What do you think this is doing to your child's mind?" She ended her piece, "Women who aren't white begin to feel left out and ugly because they never get to play the princess." Kenya's piece bristled with anger at a society that rarely acknowledges the wit or beauty of women of her race. And she wasn't alone in her feelings. Sabrina wrote, "I'm not taking my kids to see any Walt Disney movies until they have a Black woman playing the leading role." (It is important to note that when I originally wrote this piece Disney had yet to release *The Princess and the Frog*. Although Tiana offers a positive representation of a girl of color in a lead role, the film simultaneously upholds the class bias central to princess scripts.)

Both young women wanted the race of the actors changed, but they didn't challenge the class or underlying gender inequities that also characterize the lives of Cinderella, Ariel, and Snow White.

Kenya's and Sabrina's anger is justified. There should be more women of color who play the leads in these white-on-white wedding cake tales. Of course, there should also be more women of color on the Supreme Court, in Congress, as well as scrubbing up for surgeries. But I want students to understand that if the race of the character is the only thing changing, injustices may still remain.

So I have students read Mary Carter Smith's delightful retelling of Cinderella, "Cindy Ellie, A Modern Fairy Tale," which reads like laughter—bubbly, warm, spilling over with infectious good humor and playful language. In Smith's version, Cindy Ellie, who lived in East Baltimore, was "one purty young Black sister, her skin like black velvet." Her father, "like so many good men, was weak for a pretty



face and big legs and big hips." Her stepmother "had a heart as hard as a rock. The milk of human kindness had curdled in her breast. But she did have a pretty face, big legs, and great big hips. . . . Well, that fool man fell right into that woman's trap."

Cindy Ellie's stepsisters were "two big-footed, ugly gals" who made Cindy Ellie wait on them hand and foot. When the "good white folks, the good Asian folks, and the good black folks all turned out and voted for a good Black brother, running for mayor" there was cause for celebration, and a chance for Cindy Ellie to meet her Prince Charming, the mayor's son. With the help of her Godma's High John the Conqueror Root, Cindy Ellie looked like an "African Princess."

"Her rags turned into a dazzling dress of pink African laces! Her hair was braided into a hundred shining braids, and on the end of each braid were beads of pure gold! . . . Golden bracelets covered her arms clean up to her elbows! On each ear hung five small diamond earrings. On her tiny feet were dainty golden sandals encrusted with dazzling jewels! Cindy Ellie was laid back!"

The students and I love the story. It is well told and incorporates rich details

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that do exactly what Sabrina, Kenya, and their classmates wanted: It celebrates the beauty, culture, and language of African Americans. It also puts forth the possibility of cross-race alliances for social change.

But, like the original tale, Cindy Ellie's main goal in life is not working to end the plight of the homeless or teaching kids to read. Her goal, like Cinderella's, is to get her man. Both young women are transformed and made beautiful through new clothes, new jewels, new hairstyles. Both have chauffeurs who deliver them to their men. Cindy Ellie and Cinderella are nicer and kinder than their stepsisters, but the prince and Toussant, the mayor's son, don't know that. Both Cinderellas compete for their men against their sisters and the rest of the single women in their cities. They "win" because of their beauty and their fashionable attire. Both of these tales leave young women with two myths: happiness means getting a man, and transformation from wretched conditions can be achieved through consumption—in their case, through new clothes and a new hairstyle.

I am uncomfortable with those messages. I don't want students to believe that change can be bought at the mall, nor do I want them thinking that the pinnacle of a woman's life is an "I do" that supposedly leads them to a "happily ever after." I don't want my female students to see their "sisters" as competition for that scarce and wonderful commodity—men. As Justine wrote earlier in her dialogue journal, it can be overwhelming and discouraging to find that our self-images have been formed by others, but if we don't dissect them, we will continue to be influenced by them.

Writing as a Vehicle for Change

Toward the end of the unit, students write essays critiquing cartoons. I hope that this exercise will encourage them to look deeper into the issues—to challenge the servant/master relationships or the materialism that makes women appealing to their men. For some students the cartoon unit exposes the wizardry that enters our dreams and desires, but others shrug their shoulders at this. It's OK for some people to be rich and others poor; they just want to see more rich people of color or more rich women. Or better yet, be rich themselves. They accept the inequalities in power and exploitative economic relationships. Their acceptance teaches me how deep the roots of these myths are planted and how much some students, in the absence of visions for a different and better world, need to believe in the fairy-tale magic that will transform their lives—whether it's a rich man or winning the lottery.

Many students write strong critiques following the viewing. But venting their frustrations with cartoons—and even sharing it with the class—can seem an important but limited task. Yes, they can write articulate pieces. Yes, they hone their arguments and seek the just-right examples from their viewing. Through critiques and the discussions that follow, they are helping to transform each other—each comment or observation helps expose the engine of society, and they're both excited and dismayed by their discoveries.

But what am I teaching them if the lesson ends there? That it's enough to be critical without taking action? That we can quietly rebel in the privacy of the classroom while we practice our writing skills, but we don't really have to do anything about the problems we uncover, nor do we need to create anything to take the place of what we've expelled? Those are not the lessons I intend to teach. I want to develop their critical consciousness, but I also hope to move them to action.

For some the lesson doesn't end in the classroom. Many who watched cartoons before we start our study say they can no longer enjoy them. Now instead of seeing a bunch of ducks in clothes, they see the racism, sexism, and violence that swim under the surface of the stories.

Pam and Nicole swore they would not let their children watch cartoons. David told the class of coming home one day and finding his nephews absorbed in Looney Tunes. "I turned that TV off and took them down to the park to play. They aren't going to watch that mess while I'm around." Radiance described how she went to buy Christmas presents for her niece and nephew. "Before, I would have just walked into the toy store and bought them what I knew they wanted—Nintendo or Barbie. But this time, I went up the clerk and said, 'I want a toy that isn't sexist or racist.'"

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Students have also said that what they now see in cartoons, they also see in advertising, on prime-time TV, on the news, in school. Turning off the cartoons doesn't stop the sexism and racism. They can't escape, and now that they've started analyzing cartoons, they can't stop analyzing the rest of the world. And sometimes they want to stop. Once a student asked me, "Don't you ever get tired of analyzing everything?"

During a class discussion Sabrina said: "I realized these problems weren't just in cartoons. They were in everything—every magazine I picked up, every television show I watched, every billboard I passed by on the street." My goal of honing their ability to read literature and the world through the lens of justice had been accomplished at least in part. But as Justine wrote earlier, at times my students would like to remain "ignorant and happy." Without giving students an outlet for their despair, I was indeed creating what Wayne Au et al. call "factories of cynicism" in my classroom—and it wasn't pretty.

Taking Action

I look for opportunities for students to act on their knowledge. In Literature and U.S. History class, these occasions have presented themselves in the form of unfair tests and outrageous newspaper articles about Jefferson that provoked spontaneous student activism (Au, et al., 2007). But in my Contemporary Literature and Society class, I discovered that I had to create the possibility for action.

Instead of writing the same classroom essays students had written in years before, I asked students to create projects that would move beyond the classroom walls. Who could they teach about what they learned? I wanted their projects to be real. Who could their analysis touch enough to bring about real change? Students filled the board with potential readers of their work: Parents, peers, teachers, children's book authors, librarians, Disney, video store owners, advertisers.

My only rule was that they had to write a piece using evidence from cartoons or other media. Don't just rant in general, I told them. Use evidence to support your thesis. The examples might come from cartoons, advertisements, novels, your mother or father's advice. You might use lines from TV or movies. You don't have to stick to cartoons—use the world. We discussed possible options:

- Focus on one cartoon—critique it, talk about it in depth. Write about *Mulan* or *Peter Pan*. Using the chart, analyze the representation of men, women, people of color, and poor people in that movie.
- Focus on the portrayal of one group. Write about how women, men, African Americans, Latinos, Arabs, overweight people, or the poor are depicted and give examples from several cartoons or across time.
- Take an issue—like the representation of women—and relate it to your life and/or society at large.

One group of playful students wanted to create a pamphlet that could be distributed at PTA meetings throughout the city. That night they went home with assignments they'd given each other—Sarah would watch Saturday morning cartoons; Sandy, Brooke, and Carmel would watch after-school cartoons; and Kristin and Toby were assigned before-school cartoons. They ended up writing a report card for the various programs. They graded each show A through F and wrote a brief summary of their findings:

Duck Tales: At first glance the precocious ducks are cute, but look closer and see that the whole show is based on money. All their adventures revolve around finding money. Uncle Scrooge and the gang teach children that money is the only important thing in life.

Grade: C-

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Pizza-eating Ninja Turtles. What's the point? There isn't any. The show is based on fighting the "bad guy" Shredder. Demonstrating no concern for the townspeople, they battle and fight, but never get hurt. This cartoon teaches a false sense of violence to kids: fight and you don't get hurt, or solve problems through fists and swords instead of words.

Grade: D

Popeye: This show oozes with horrible messages from passive Olive Oyl to the “hero man” Popeye. This cartoon portrays ethnic groups as stupid. It is political also—teaching children that Americans are the best and conquer all others.

Grade: F

On the back of the pamphlet, they listed some tips for parents to guide them in wise cartoon selection.

Catkin wrote about the sexual stereotyping and adoration of beauty in children’s movies. Her article described how she and other teenage women carry these messages with them still:

Women’s roles in fairy tales distort reality—from Jessica Rabbit’s six-mile strut in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* to Tinker Bell’s obsessive vanity in *Peter Pan*. These seemingly innocent stories teach us to look for our faults. As Tinker Bell inspects her tiny body in a mirror only to find that her minute hips are simply too huge, she shows us how to turn the mirror into an enemy. . . . And this scenario is repeated in girls’ locker rooms all over the world. Because we can never look like Cinderella, we begin to hate ourselves. The Barbie syndrome starts as we begin a lifelong search for the perfect body. Crash diets, fat phobias, and an obsession with the materialistic become commonplace. The belief that a product will make us rise above our competition, our friends, turns us into addicts. Our fix is that Calvin Klein push-up bra, Guess jeans, Chanel lipstick, and the latest in suede flats. We don’t call it deception; we call it good taste. And soon it feels awkward going to the mailbox without makeup.

Catkin wanted to publish her piece in a magazine for young women so they would begin to question the origin of the standards by which they judge themselves.

Most students wrote articles for local and national newspapers or magazines. Some published in neighborhood papers, some in church newsletters. Lila Johnson’s article “Looking Pretty: Waiting for the Prince” and Hasina Deary’s “Help Me Syndrome” have both been published nationally.

The writing in these articles was tighter and cleaner than for-the-teacher essays because it had the potential for a real audience beyond the classroom walls. The possibility of publishing their pieces changed the level of students’ intensity for the project. Anne, who turned in hastily written drafts last year, said, “Five drafts and I’m not finished yet!”

But more importantly, students saw themselves as actors in the world; they were fueled by the opportunity to convince some parents of the long-lasting effects cartoons impose on their children, or to enlighten their peers about the roots of some of their insecurities. Instead of leaving students full of bile, stand-

ing around with their hands on their hips, shaking their heads about how bad the world is, I provided them the opportunity to make a difference. ♦

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