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# **Does the Toy Story series depict evolving gender roles?**

**A critical report by**

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**Abstract**

This critical report conducts a thorough investigation into the portrayal of gender roles in the Toy Story series, a popular work of Pixar Animation Studios. The primary goal is to examine and assess the franchise, how it has progressed in breaking traditional gender stereotypes across its various installments and how it investigates character development, and narrative arcs in the Toy Story saga. This paper aims to stimulate autonomous inquiry and the development of academic arguments based on research, analysis, and critical thinking by examining the growth of gender depictions in these films. It seeks to identify implications resulting from the investigation of evolving gender roles in the Toy Story series.

**Keywords:** Toy Story, masculinity, gender roles, Disney, animation, Pixar, femininity.

## **Contents Page**

Page 1 – Assignment Cover Sheet

Page 2 – Title Page

Page 3 – Abstract

Page 3 – Keywords

Page 5 – Introduction

Page 6 – Negative representation of Femininity vs Positive portrayals of Masculinity

Page 8 – Female characters as Key plot motivators

Page 10 – The Male centered world Transitioning to the Female centered world

Page 12 – Conclusion

Page 13 – Bibliography

Page 16 – Appendices

Page 16 – Appendix 1 Figures

## Introduction

The movie Toy Story, helmed by John Lasseter, emerged in 1995 as a collaborative project between Disney and Pixar, both of which are now established as animation powerhouses. This renowned kids' film holds significant societal relevance, It constructs narratives mainly revolving around friendships, trust, relationships and love, guiding children on how to navigate and integrate into society. Within Toy Story, aside from its distinctive plotlines and endearing characters, the series has often been spoken about, among audiences, concerning the portrayal of gender roles in animated films. The purpose of this report is to determine whether the Toy Story series depicts changing gender roles in a progressive manner over its numerous parts.

This report shows the portrayal of gender roles in the Toy Story films and how it evolved with time. Although it is understood that masculinity is persistent throughout the series, it gets better with every film as more female characters are added to it. The films revolve around Andy's toys, Woody and Buzz Lightyear, who are the protagonist and deuteragonist of the film, are both the main male characters. And with female characters like Bo Peep, she has a very drastic change as compared to how she is portrayed in the first and fourth movie. She is a more prominent character and has more power than she did in the first film because Bo has undergone a significant shift. (Corkery, 2019 [3]) Her clothing, appearance, speech and movement all changed.

## **Negative representation of Femininity vs Positive portrayals of Masculinity**

The characters of Sheriff Woody and Buzz Lightyear clearly establish the alpha male archetype at the start of Toy Story. Both become metaphors for modern man in strife. They base their value on a masculine concept of competitiveness and power, wishing not just to be Andy's favorite toy, but also to have adulation and dominance over the other toys in the playroom. (Wilkes, 2017 [18]) This is clearly seen with the jealousy that Woody has, when Buzz is introduced as the new toy. They have their fights and the cliched brotherly love towards the end of the movie, where all is forgotten and true friendship prevails.

There is an instance, wherein Sid's younger sister, Hannah discovers Buzz and invites him to her tea party as "Mrs Nesbit," complete with pink apron and bonnet. He is completely transformed into a woman and accepts his new job. (Wilkes, 2017 [18]) The portrayal of this feminine character is shown in a very negative way as Buzz acts very weirdly and Woody tries to smack Buzz out of it, to get him back to normal. Hannah is also portrayed here as someone who takes care of the toys. Here femininity is seen as a caregiver. There's also Bo Peep, a minor character who mostly served as Woody's voice of reason. (Bownass, 2019 [2]) She is clearly seen as his lover and nothing more than that. Here femininity is seen as a love interest. Mulvey (1989) [12] eventually theorizes that the female character would frequently fall in love with the male character in order to have the female character entirely overpowered inside the film. Furthermore, in the opening scene of Toy Story 1, Bo first appears as a kidnap victim when Andy role-plays a robbery game with the toys. All she can do is clutch her left hand to her

brow in terror. (Li, 2023 [10]) She is shown as a very powerless character. In both cases, the female characters are sidelined.

Hopkins (2008) [7] said that the women in this story are virtually completely unimportant. And this is true because female characters like Andy's Mom, Bo Peep, Mrs. Potato Head, Sid's sister Hannah and Baby Molly are all just given filler roles. They are all present in the plot only to help out the main characters. A statistic as shown by Lauzen et al (2005) [9], shows that major male characters outnumbered major female characters (73% vs. 27%) overall in popular films like Toy Story. This just comes to show that initially, masculinity was seen as the way to go forward, as far as portrayal on screen was concerned.

## **Female characters as Key plot motivators**

In the second and third Toy Story films there were small but noticeable changes. Each character goes through a significant homosocial relationship, from the revelation of the alpha male's flaws, such as acute loneliness and vulnerability, to figurative emasculation through even the slightest disempowerment, and eventually matures into an acceptance of his more traditionally "feminine" aspects. (Gillam et al, 2008 [5]) This was good progress as we could see both the male characters changing emotionally and we could connect with them better. Buzz and Woody learn to accept and encourage their "feminine aspects," such as kindness and tenderness, as well as "caring, sharing, nurturing, and community." While traditional Disney animation has mostly failed to include feminist ideology in order to empower its female characters, the feminist movement "has been surprisingly effective in rewriting the type of masculine power promoted by Disney's animated characters, particularly in Pixar films. (Decker, 2010 [4])

As far as female characters are concerned, Jessie is a great introduction, having a personality, and kicking ass. However, the film is not about her. (Hopkins, 2008 [7]) Although Jessie is a strong female character, she is introduced as a side part in Woody's world. After Woody and Buzz, she is still the third most significant character, frequently functioning as the group's leader in their absence.



A more prominent female character is very subtly shown in Toy Story 3. Andy donates all of his toys to a girl named Bonnie at the end of the film. The native toys in Bonnie's room already have a doll leader named Dolly. (Li, 2023 [10]) Here, Bonnie is introduced as the successor to Andy. She is Andy 2.0. Even Though her role is taking over the toys, it is an end to Andy's journey. And the leader of her toys is a female toy as well. Dolly lectures Andy's toys on proper behavior, but Woody can't help but interrupt and order. (Li, 2023 [10]) Here the shift in authority from male to female characters should be noticed.

Let's also take an example of the new character Ken, who is introduced as Barbie's partner. He is portrayed as a closeted gay fashionista who enjoys writing in glittery purple ink with curly-Q flourishes. (Wilson, 2010 [19]) There are moments like these where femininity is used for a humorous touch.

## **The Male centered world Transitioning to the Female centered world**

In the fourth Toy Story film, there is a major transformation of Bo Peep, who was earlier shown as a damsel in distress. Her speech had a makeover wherein, she had a deeper voice, more grit and natural charm. (Bownass, 2019 [2]) Even her appearance changed as compared to how we saw her in the first film. Her outfit was revamped, with the shepherdess gown transformed as a jumpsuit, her original skirt thrown over her neck as a cape, and her crook used to ward off any unfriendly toys. (Corkery, 2019 [3]) It wasn't just her looks, but also her movement that had changed. "The creators ended up animating her more rigidly than they would a human character. They limited her torso motions as well as the bending of her arms and wrists." (Bownass, 2019 [2]) One of the most essential things in developing the current picture, according to Josh Cooley, the director of the fourth installment, was reimagining the character, who had only around six minutes of screen time in the prior two films, into someone his daughter would strive to be like. (Corkery, 2019 [3]) This time round, both Woody and Bo Peep are almost given equal importance. They get along well, and Bo even provides a solution when Woody confronts barriers and perils along the journey. Furthermore, Bo's survival capacity strengthens her, allowing her to blame Woody when he defies the operation plan due to his irresponsibility, whereas all Woody can do is apologize constantly. (Li, 2023 [10])

The world has started talking about gender issues more than they used to. The attitude of the general public has been changing in recent years with regards to women. With the triumphant return of Bo Peep and the casting of the series' first female antagonist, 'Toy Story 4' demonstrates that it is ahead of the curve in the "post-MeToo" world.

(Corkery, 2019 **[3]**) The Me Too movement brought to light the issues around both sexual harassment and abuse of women in the workplace. But it wasn't just Bo Peep in the spotlight, it was also about the female villain Gabby Gabby (a pull-string doll) who is less spoken about. She's the franchise's creepiest and most sympathetic villain, a sharp but tragic reflection of the series protagonist Woody. Gabby emerges as possibly the most complicated and fascinating villain in Pixar's entire history. (Zachary, 2019 **[20]**) This mirrors the audience's idea toward changing sexist ideologies and centering women as powerful in their own right.

## **Conclusion**

As I critically analyzed all the four installments of the Toy Story series, I found that masculinity was persistent in the first film and as the films progressed, slight elements of femininity kept getting added. It was seen that male characters were more likely to be important and powerful, but positive and autonomous female characters in animated films were underrepresented in the 1990s. However, the dramatic transformation of Bo in Toy Story 4 demonstrates that the film industry values female image shaping and gender equality more. (Li, 2023 [10]) The Toy Story series takes a progressive approach to depicting changing gender roles and it tackles preconceptions through rich character depictions and developments.

Another aspect of the series worth mentioning is that the female counterpart is a recurring motif in the toy story series as they keep introducing a female character to many of the male characters. It started with Mr and Mrs Potato Head initially and then they brought in Jess for Woody, the same with Andy as he gets replaced by Bonnie. Nonetheless, there is room for more inclusive female characters, barring Bo Peep's presence in the fourth film as the same trend is still there, where male narratives are primary, and female narratives are secondary. But to conclude, the Toy Story series does in fact evolve gender roles throughout their installments.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Figures



Figure 1: Buzz Lightyear treated as a girl toy



Figure 2: Bo Peep's clothing transformation