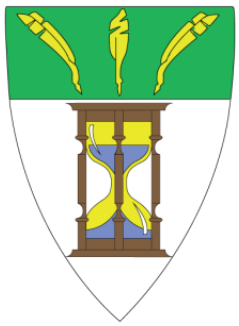

How does fiction shape us?

The stereotypes and clichés in fiction

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1. Introduction

Fiction holds an extraordinary power to shape our perceptions, beliefs, and even our identities. Stories have been integral to human history, serving as tools to preserve culture, inspire change, and build empathy. At its core, fiction helps us understand diverse perspectives, empathise with characters, and imagine new possibilities. But while narratives can challenge and reshape the way we think, they can also reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate clichés. It is this particular darker side of fiction that sums up what this *mémoire* is about. From the heroic protagonist and the misunderstood villain, familiar tropes provide comfort and familiarity, however, they risk narrowing our perspectives. Stereotypes, in particular, can influence the way we perceive real-world individuals or groups.. In the making of this *mémoire*, I have used various examples from real books, TV series and movies, such as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter, Percy Jackson* and many different Disney movies, to illustrate just how present these stereotypes and clichés are, and how this can shape us. Please note that there are spoilers for certain pieces of fiction throughout this *mémoire*. By examining the links between fiction, stereotypes and clichés, we can get a better sense of how stories shape our worldview.

2. Definitions

Here are some terms I'll be working with throughout the *mémoire* so allow me to define them beforehand:

2.1 What is fiction?

"Fiction is any creative work, chiefly any narrative work, portraying individuals, events or places that are imaginary or in ways that are imaginary. Fictional portrayals are thus inconsistent with history, fact or plausibility."[1]

Fiction is what one calls any piece of media that is not factually true. This genre is mostly associated with books, but any movie, TV series, short stories, etc. that are not historically accurate are fiction. Fiction works may be based on events, people, or places that existed or happened, but any change the creator imagines and inserts in the work turns it into a piece of fiction. There are many different types of fiction. A few of them are the following:

2.1.1 Fantasy

This genre of fiction is one of the most popular ones. It deals with magical realms and non-existent creatures, such as dragons, unicorns, phoenixes, and so on. Anything mythical and magical would fall into the fantasy genre, the most famous being the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling.

2.1.2 Dystopian

Being the opposite of utopian, dystopian novels are dark version of the world, mostly set in the future. It revolves around unjust societies, corrupt governments, apocalyptic events and settings, and generally extreme versions of our future, in a bad way. This genre includes *1984* by George Orwell, *The Handmaids Tale* by Margaret Atwood, and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins.

2.1.3 Science fiction

As the title implies, science fiction is about technological and scientific advances, that allow humanity to, for example, travel through time and space. Examples of science fiction would be *Back to the Future* and *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adam.

2.1.4 Mystery

Mysteries involve a crime being solved by a detective, usually the protagonist. This can be a murder mystery, a disappearance, a theft or any kind of crime that needs solving. Author's such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie wrote mystery novels.

2.2 What are stereotypes?

"[An unfair belief] that all people or things with a particular characteristic are the same."[2]

A stereotype is a prejudice, in which people are generalised by a certain trait. This trait can be cultural, physical, gender, nationality, etc. Stereotypes are obviously wrong, and are a form of discrimination, as are prejudices and generalisation, and are hurtful to many individuals and societies. Here are the most common stereotype types:

[1] Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). *Fiction*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

[2] Encyclopaedia Britannica**.** (n.d.). *Stereotype*. Britannica Dictionary.

2.2.1 Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are very common to be confronted with. From early on, girls and boys are treated differently due to stereotypes. For example, a common stereotype is that boys do not cry while girls tend to be more emotional. Girls are better at school than boys, who want to run around and become a strong young man. These stereotypes are ones one relives over and over again, and are incorporated into our daily life, with advertising and adult expectations.

2.2.2 Racial or ethnic stereotypes

Racial or ethnic stereotypes include everything from nationality, social status to cultural norms. It is also called the racial stereotype, and is often related to religion, nationality and ethnicity. Beliefs like the English are posh and snobby, Muslims are terrorists and all Irish are ginger are examples of racist stereotypes, that are incorrect and not true.

2.2.3 Physical stereotypes

A very common physical stereotype is the belief that a beautiful person is also a good person, and an ugly one is bad. Any prejudice based on physical appearances is a physical stereotype. Sayings like fat people are lazy and tattooed, bulky men are criminals, elderly people are fragile, old schooled and boring, are all physical stereotypes.

2.3 What are clichés?

"A cliché is an idea or turn of phrase that is considered dull and ineffective because of widespread overuse."[3]

Clichés are widely used expressions, sayings and creative plots in stories that have become overused, thus become unimaginative and considered lazy. In a story, clichés make the storyline predictable and boring, even if, originally, the idea was innovative and thought provoking. There are two types of clichés:

2.3.1 Verbal clichés

These clichés are made up of widely used figures of speech, or vocabulary. Sayings such as *what goes around comes around* or *crystal clear* are examples of verbal clichés.

2.3.2 Conceptual clichés

The protagonist waking up at the end of the movie, revealing it was all a dream. A pre-teenager who has thought they are not special is destined to save the world. A mad scientist. These are all conceptual clichés. Plot lines, character archetypes, predictable endings, any non-imaginative, widespread piece of a story.

[3] Shabo, M. (2024, May 30). *What is a cliché? Definition, meaning & examples*. Scribbr.

3. The original use of fiction

Ever since the dawn of civilisation, humanity has used storytelling as a way to communicate. Humans would tell stories around fireplaces, draw them on the walls of caves, write them down, pass them on through generations. They were meant to entertain and to teach, especially folktales that were told to children and young people. These fairy tales were not only meant to console childre but to give them a lesson, explain societal norms, and help them understand the world. Fairy tales differ from country to country, through societal expectations and what is considered "right" in a specific counrty.[4] For example, a German book from the 19th century, *Struwwelpeter* (1845), contains many shocking stories about children suffering after doing something that was socially wrong. One of these stories is a young boy who would not eat his soup for five days, and every day the illustrator draws him becoming thinner and thinner, and on the fifth day, he dies. Another story in this book is another child whose mother goes out and tells him not to suck his thumb. As soon as the mother leaves, the boy puts his thumb in his mouth. Then, a man with huge scissors opens the door, and chases the poor boy around the room until he cuts off both of the thumbs. Now, the child can no longer suck them. These simple and horrifying stories were meant to scare children into behaving and fitting into society. Stories stick with children forever, whether it is because they idolize and remember their favourite character, usually the one they can relate to the most, or are scared and remember their least favourite character, usually the one portrayed as a villain. Through these methods of teaching children, one could use stories to manipulate and completely change society's outlook on certain subjects, like a certain group of people or religion.

The Austrian psychologist Bruno Bettelheim wrote a book in 1976 where he psychoanalyses fairy tales. Not the sugar-coated Disney ones, but the original, much more brutal but less romantic ones. His general hypothesis in this book is that fairy tales prepare children for the world. He believes that fairy tales are always relevant in every time period, and are thus universal. The child can identify with an archetypal character of a certain tale, then learn about the obstacles of this character and can overcome them by reading how the character overcomes them. Furthermore, for Bettelheim, fairy tales are not about romantic love, but family conflicts. For example, if a child is jealous of their siblings, it can identify itself as Cinderella, who feels unfairly treated. But at the end of the fairy tale, Cinderella's worth is recognised by the prince, and the child will be reassured of their own worth. Bruno Bettelheim was, however, often accused of controversial actions, like plagiarism, mistreatment of patients and being manipulative and evil.

[4] Maity, N. (2014). *Damsels in Distress: A Textual Analysis of Gender roles in Disney Princess Films*. IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS), 19(10), 28-31.

4. Stereotypes in fiction

Following the definitions of several types of stereotypes, this part of the *mémoire* will be about where one can find these stereotypes in fiction, and how they can affect and impact us. I have included a variety of examples, ranging from Disney's *Aladdin* and its princesses to Roald Dahl's children books, Marvel, and Star Wars. These quite clearly portray the most common stereotypes in fiction, and are thus easily used to illustrate examples.

4.1 Racial and ethnic stereotypes

Disney movies are the best examples of any ethnic and cultural stereotypes, as this was very common in the earlier movies. From caricatured African-American depictions in *Dumbo* to Native American mockeries in *Peter Pan*, Disney has a variety of examples of stereotypes to note. To start off this chapter, *Aladdin,* the cartoon film from 1992, serves as a perfect example of racist and ethnic stereotypes in fiction.

The movie begins with an opening song in the city of Agrabah, in which you see the overall setting of the film. The climate is a blazing desert, the huge palace of the city is decorated in glittering, golden onion-domed roofs, while the slums are poorly made houses of clay. One can see camels used as transport, merchants haggling at the markets, crowds of people flooding the streets and exotic animals such as monkeys. The opening song itself makes a description of the landscape, by telling it to be "flat and immense, and the heat is intense", while showing the desert.

While about 60-70% of the Middle East is covered by desert, the Arab countries are rich and varied in architectural infrastructure and landscape, aspects not depicted in *Aladdin*. It shows the Western stereotype of what the Middle East looks like: hot, monotonous and lifeless. However, the average temperature in July in Baghdad, the city on which Agrabah is based, is 44°C, and in December, 19°C. Though the winter is still warm for Western standards, it is not constantly a blazing desert, contrary to what is shown in *Aladdin.*

The depictions of the Arab people *Aladdin* are heavily based on Islamophobic and antisemitic sentiments towards Muslims and Jews. Most citizens, particularly the men, at the markets of Agrabah are depicted as violent, scheming, thieving and ruthless. They are shown to have grotesque facial features, tend to have a darker skin colour compared to the protagonists, Aladdin and Jasmine, and they are meant to be generally unpleasant. The men portrayed in the movie are either short and stout, tall and extremely muscular in the upper body, or very thin and lean, except for Aladdin. They have huge teeth, some are often missing, and carry around knives and swords. Antisemitic depictions are also common, as many people are drawn with large noses to add disgust to their faces. The women of Agrabah are either portrayed as fully veiled from head to toe, or belly dancing with more exposing clothes. Some have similar grotesque facial and body features as the men, just with poorly added make-up. Furthermore, Aladdin and Jasmine both have anglicized features, and an American accent, while merchants and other people have heavy Arabic accents, especially Jafar, the villain of the story. So, the overall picture of an Arab citizen is a haggling, violent merchant with an unpleasant physical appearance.

Image 1: The men portrayed in the movie have huge teeth, some are often missing, and carry around knives and swords.

Image 2: While Aladdin runs through the streets of Agrabah, one can see the citizens doing some rather bizarre things.

Image 3: The women belly dancing with more exposing clothing.

In the original movie of *Aladdin*, when it first came out, the opening song started like this:

"*Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam, where they cut off your ear, if they don't like your face, it's barbaric, but hey, it's home"*

This introduction of the Arab countries immediately classifies them as strange, dangerous, and "other." This cruelty described in the song is another racial stereotype of the people that live there, and reinforces the idea of the Arab world being barbaric and alien. When the ACD, Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, challenges Disney on this issue, they changed the lyrics to what it is today:

"*Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam, where it's flat and immense and the heat is intense, it's barbaric, but hey, it's home."*

Even though Disney changed the lyrics, they actually just changed the stereotype mentioned in the song, changing from people, to the landscape. The image made by that first line in the film still poses a problem, but it is better than what it used to be.[5]

As Disney received a lot of criticism and protests about *Aladdin* from 1992, the studio sought advice from the Muslim Public Affairs Council, a nonprofit organization in the United States of America whose aim is to improve the perception of Arab people in America, when casting the live-action version of the film. As a result, the new version of *Aladdin* is much less racist than what it used to be, starting with the introduction song. Disney changed it to:

"*Oh, imagine a land, it's a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam, where you wander among, every culture and tongue, it's chaotic, but hey, it's home."*

This no longer portrays any stereotype regarding people, or landscape, and the word "barbaric" has been eliminated. The changes in the movie continue for the better, with, for example, the use of the Arabic accent when speaking English. Unlike the original movie, the accent is not used as a marker of evil. While Jasmine and Aladdin are still anglicized by their accents, villains like Jafar are not portrayed with heavy Arabic accents as a villain-marker. On the contrary, the accent is used by Jasmine's father, the Sultan, who is not a goofy, naïve leader, but more of a wise, thoughtful character, who gives advice to Jasmine. It is also used for the city's chief defender, Hakim, who remains loyal and just to his Sultan and to Jasmine when Jafar spreads chaos. The actors themselves come from many different countries, representing the variety of cultures that are meant to be in a cosmopolitan and multicultural city, which Agrabah is meant to be. Not only are the actors from around the world, but different cultures are represented through the fashion choice of the studio. They range from Jasmine wearing an Indian

[5] Wingfield, M., & Karaman, B. (n.d.). *Arab Stereotypes and American Educators*. ADC.

saree, Afghan payraans, an overall shirt, and various turban styles on the citizens. Overall, the new *Aladdin* is significantly less racist than the old one.[6]

In 2015, the Public Policy Polling, a survey business that publishes weekly polls on voters' opinions in the US, held a survey for the upcoming elections in 2016. The poll was based around Donald Trump's proposition of banning Muslims from entering the USA, and the bombing of Agrabah, the fictional city of Aladdin. As it turned out, of the 532 Republican Primary voters that were asked if they were in support of bombing Agrabah, 30% were in favour. 57% were not sure, and only 13% opposed it. A similar number of Democratic primary voters were asked the same question, with a result of 19% in support and 36% opposed. The racism continues, with 36% of Republican primary voters believing Trump's claim that thousands of Arabs in New Jersey cheered as the World Trade Center collapsed on 9/11, a claim repeatedly denied by New Jersey officials and residents. 54% of the Republicans surveyed were also in favour of banning Muslims from entering the country, and 46% in support of creating a national database for all Muslims.[7]

These shocking statistics show that the representation of Arabs in *Aladdin* were memorable for many people, and even influenced their political decisions. By feeding voters with stereotypes that are already present, these stereotypes become reason to vote for certain politicians. It becomes a sort of propaganda. Republicans who were in favour of bombing Agrabah were also supportive of banning Muslims and creating a national database for them. The fiction of raving lunatics running around with knives becomes their belief and perception of reality, but whether these beliefs come from the movie itself, the upbringing of the voter, or a combination of both, I have yet to discover.

5. Gender stereotypes

In modern books, gender stereotypes are less common, or less noticeable. But in many older children's books, these stereotypes are quite present. So, this chapter will analyse the gender stereotypes in different times and genres.

5.1 Roald Dahl's Depiction of Women

First off is Roald Dahl's depiction of women in his children's books. Roald Dahl was a British author born in 1916, who wrote stories for adults and children alike, but ultimately gained fame through his ingenious children's books. During his lifetime, he was criticised for having racist and sexist content in his writing, and was accused of being anti-Semitic, though Dahl personally saw it as anti-Israel. His most notable works are *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), *Matilda* (1988) and *The Witches* (1983)[8], and during the production time of these stories, there was a real social movement, which is referenced in *Matilda.* These books are still relevant today, and are read by a great number of children and adults alike.

The main stereotype Roald Dahl includes into his works is that good women are thin, fragile-looking, caring, beautiful, and otherwise exceptionally lovely. This stereotype is most clearly seen in *Matilda*, a story about a young, very clever girl who wants to read and learn, but is confronted with neglecting parents and a bully as a headmistress. Her teacher, a caring, delicate woman, becomes a motherly figure for Matilda and ends up raising her as her own. While *Matilda* promotes education for women, it also clearly shows the physical difference between the women who are portrayed as good and those portrayed as evil or bad. For example, Miss Honey, the teacher who loves and cares for all of her

[6] Saeed, S. (2019, May 28). *5 Ways the New Aladdin Film is Less Racist Than the Cartoon Version*. Arab America.
[7] The Guardian. (2015, December 18). *Poll: 30% of GOP voters support bombing Agrabah, the city from Aladdin.*
[8] The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. (2018). Roald Dahl | Biography & Books. In *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

children in class, is described as delicate, fragile, and light weighted. In contrast, the evil headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, hates children and wants to torture them for fun. She is big and bulky, has huge calves, and big muscles that won her an Olympic medal in hammer throwing. She is compared to a rhinoceros. The representation of big females being bad is also relevant in Matilda's family, where her mother is also a larger woman, and is a bad and neglectful mother and woman. This weight discrimination is found in many of Dahl's books, including James' horrid aunt in *James and the Giant Peach,* Augustus Gloop in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory,* and Bruno Jenkins in *The Witches*.[9]

5.2 Disney's Princesses

This kind of stereotyping is most famously seen in Disney's Princess movies. From the first princess, Snow White, to the most recent one, Raya, they all portray some kind of gender role stereotype throughout their movies. All the earlier princess movies show a submissive woman waiting for her Prince Charming. In the end, she gets him by doing literally nothing, unless you would call waiting in hopes of a valiant rescue something. The princess dreams of a happily-ever-after, which cannot be fulfilled without the help of a man.

There are two main categories of stereotypes that are portrayed throughout all Disney princess movies: body image and leadership or decision-making skills. In the Classics era of Disney movies, the era that includes Snow White, Aurora and Cinderella, the princesses are shown to be desirable because of their intense beauty. Snow White is known to be the "fairest of them all" and becomes a kind and nurturing mother-figure for the seven dwarves while she waits for someone to rescue her from her evil stepmother. Cinderella cooks, cleans, and does the house work for her evil stepsisters and stepmother, who do not work and stay in the kitchen, and are thus bad. Cinderella's beauty, along with a little help from her fairy godmother, gains her the prince. Their beauty, patience and submissiveness are the keys to their success, even if the way their bodies are drawn are not achievable or realistic in the real world. In the Renaissance era of Disney, films like *The Little Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast* and *Mulan* were brought out. In these movies, especially in *Mulan*, the stereotypical cooking-and-cleaning-girl is not found as often anymore, but is replaced with a girl who is quirky and different to society, and she gets a mission. However, certain stereotypes still remain, especially the body image stereotype. Ariel, for example, has a wonderful voice and the ability to speak, but lacks legs to look human. She then gives up her voice for a pair of legs, which in other words could mean she gave up her ability to speak up, to say anything, to make herself look more appealing for her love. This submissive action got her the Prince Charming she always dreamed of. Mulan, who saves the entire empire of China singlehandedly, only finds her real happily-ever-after once the General decides he likes her and wants to marry her. All of the princesses in this era are still drawn with the unrealistic, sexist body image of the Classics era. Once Disney got into the New-Age era, the era of Rapunzel, Vaiana and Raya, the princesses did change for the better. More cultures were represented, though not very accurately, and they no longer needed a prince. Their actions become their own, and they become decisive and great leaders. The only thing that does not change is the animations of the body. Disney princesses are, to this day, being animated inaccurately and unrealistically to make them appealing. They are always very slim, have huge eyes and a little chin, and many other unachievable body stereotypes are built into them.[10]

A study in 2018 from the *International Journal of Asian Social Sciences* researched and interviewed a group of children about their opinions on the physical appearances of Disney princesses. They mostly

[9] Author(s). (n.d.). *Gender Stereotypes and Representation of Women in Roald Dahl's Books*

[10] Jin, Z. (2023). *Evolution of Disney Princesses and Its Impact on Young Girls*. University of Toronto Mississauga

mentioned those princesses with stereotypical beauty ideals, mostly those from earlier eras, and princesses like Vaiana, Tiana and Merida were hardly mentioned at all. The same study asked 10 girls aged four to six to identify the princesses using common beauty aspects, and the same princesses, Vaiana and Merida, had the least amount of recognition in those aspects. This is likely also an issue of colourism. Furthermore, another experiment showed that out of 10 girls, one third of them displayed wishes to change something about their body, and half of them expressed fear of becoming fat. This shows that Disney's princesses have an impact on body anxiety for girls.

A further study by students of the Brigham Young University in 2016 revealed that young girls who accept and act according female stereotypes are less likely to be confident that they can complete certain tasks such as maths. They also are less likely to continue a profession in the science field, do not like getting dirty, and will not experiment and be as curious about things. Their lack of self-confidence can shape their belief that they are not cut out for any leadership or decisive jobs, and it can sometimes even cause depression. To sum it up, Disney princess movies can negatively influence children in many ways.[11] However, there is positive side to the influence of this. A correlation was found in a different study between girls' involvement in princess culture and their willingness to support women's rights and gender equality. Hegemonic masculinity, a type of masculinity thought to be dominant over others, has less influence and effect on these children. Disney's princess movies are only a small part of the upbringing of a child, thus only a small fraction of the total influence on a child.[12]

5.3 Portrayal of Gender in Marvel and Star Wars

One could write a lot more about Disney's portrayal of princesses and their body, but a less researched topic would be the portrayal of gender in the Marvel and Star Wars franchises, who were both bought by Disney in 2009 and 2012 to, most likely, attract more male audience, as young boys have shown a greater interest in superheroes than princes.

In a more general superhero media, it is often the case that the genders of the superheroes play along the lines of their gender role stereotypes. The typical male superhero is broad, highly muscular, violent and aggressive, quite loud, and very powerful, while the female superhero, far outnumbered by the males, is more sexualised, slim, and helpless, and less engaged in combat. Even though both genders of superheroes are known to show stereotypical masculinity, females are also more likely to be emotional, caring, attractive, and worried than males, who are more likely to be shown as angry and threatening. Femininity is often used as a sign of weakness, passivity and helplessness. In the original Star Wars movies, *A New Hope* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), the galaxy is largely male-dominated, and the Force is reserved solely for men. Furthermore, to become a Jedi and use the Force, one must suppress emotions, which is one of the biggest expectations of stereotypical masculinity, disguised as a source of power. In general, superheroes are not shown to be vulnerable, and stereotypical masculinity is favoured in this content.

Even though the direct relationship between Marvel and children's behaviour is not known, there have been correlations between superhero media and behaviour of pre-school children. For example, superhero media predicts typical masculine behaviour in young boys, but not for girls. Both genders

[11] Coyne, S. M., Linder, J. R., Rasmussen, E. E., Nelson, D. A., & Birkbeck, V. (2016). *Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement With Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children*. Child Development, 87(6), 1909-1925.

[12] Coyne, S. M., Linder, J. R., Booth, M., Keenan-Kroff, S., Shawcroft, J. E., & Yang, C. (2021). *Princess Power: Longitudinal Associations Between Engagement With Princess Culture in Preschool and Gender Stereotypical Behavior, Body Esteem, and Hegemonic Masculinity in Early Adolescence*. Child Development, 92(6), 2413-2430.

are more likely to play with toy weapons, or make weapons from toys they have, and play out certain combat scenarios of their superhero content. This has often been discussed in the context of video games and media violence, the hypothesis being that one would become violent through violent content.[13] A further study showed that costumes, which are highly gendered, can change a child's behaviour, such as their toy preference and prosocial behaviour. This study involved over 220 children in the US between 3 and 5 years old, and each child was assigned a gendered, counter-gendered or gender-neutral costume, and then had to do three gender-associated tasks. When the boys wore the masculine-gendered Marvel costume, it was shown that they were less likely to help and less likely to choose a more feminine toy than they would in a feminine or neutral costume. Girls, on the other hand, did not show any preference or change in their behaviour throughout the study.[14]

6. Physical stereotypes

The term "physical stereotypes" refers to the body portrayal and appearance in fiction, most noticeable in movies and series, as one can actually see the appearance of a character. Animated Disney movies will also be used for this section of the *mémoire*, as these animations show a correlation between a character's personality and physical appearance.

6.1 Weight Discrimination

The first correlation I have noticed in Disney animated movies is that the comic reliefs are often plumper people, mostly men. They are either smaller, fatter or more intensely muscular than the main character, or have a combination of those traits. As they are used as comic reliefs, they are shown to be very dim-witted and stupid or lazy. These characters are generally not the sharpest pencil in the box, and additional features are added to their appearance to make them look ridiculous and funny. For example, in Disney's animated version of *Beauty and the Beast (1991)*, the character LeFou is a very small, plump man who flanks the antagonist, Gaston. During the movie, Gaston is on a quest to convince Belle to marry him, and LeFou helps him and continuously compliments Gaston at every opportunity. There is a whole song dedicated to LeFou praising Gaston's greatness to motivate him to not give up on Belle. During this scene, the small man is punched, thrown around, having things thrown on him, but all while grinning like a fool. The animations of his body make him look like a bouncy ball flying around, who could go on forever as the impact of being punched or landing on a hard surface bounces of his body harmlessly, and he is too dim-witted to do something about it. In other occasions you see LeFou doing either very silly things, or completely failing at simple tasks. He has features added to his character to make him look even more ridiculous, like missing teeth, a huge, bouncy nose and big feet and hands. This reoccurs in many other Disney animated movies, like in *Mulan*, the characters Yao and Chien-Po, in *Ratatouille*, the chef Gusteau and the evil Skinner, in *The Lion King*, the warthog Pumbaa, and many others.

A particular series of movies uses this stereotype very often, namely the *Harry Potter* series. Right from the first movie to the end, overweight characters are used as comic reliefs, bullies and villains. During the entire duration of the series, Harry's uncle Vernon Dursley and cousin Dudley Dursley are shown to be bullies to Harry, making him do everything in the house while they sit back on the sofa and eat. Dudley is greedy, very dumb and spoiled, while his father is not much better. Furthermore,

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[13] Clarke LL, Hine B. The portrayal of gender in Marvel and Star Wars media targeted towards children. Front Sociol. 2024 Feb 15;9:1338914. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2024.1338914. PMID: 38425670; PMCID: PMC10901992.

[14] Coyne, Sarah M., et al. "Dressing up with Disney and make-believe with Marvel: The impact of gendered costumes on gender typing, prosocial behavior, and perseverance during early childhood." *Sex Roles* (2021): 1-12.

Vernon's sister Marge resembles her bulldog and is also portrayed as a bully to Harry, a greedy woman with a lack of intelligence. Harry later accidentally blows her up into a balloon-shaped form. At Hogwarts, Draco Malfoy's friends, Crabbe and Goyle, are also portrayed and overweight, thick and greedy, especially in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets,* where both of them eat drugged cupcakes floating in the air without questions, while holding on a heap of sweets in their arms. Neville Longbottom, though not particularly overweight, but more like slightly chubby in the first movies, is known for not being very good at anything, and is always unlucky. Thus, he is often a comical character who cannot be taken seriously by anyone. There are a few more examples in the series, but all the good, heroic people who are brave and fight, none of them are even slightly overweight.

This common representation of chubbier and shorter characters is reflected in societal norms, and can be found in the term "pretty privilege". "Pretty privilege" refers to the advantages that individuals perceived as physically attractive can receive in various aspects of life. For example, those people would be more likely to receive compliments, friendliness, and invitations from others. They would have other people making positive assumptions of their personality, have more opportunities in jobs, and people would just generally be kinder to them. This privilege is often associated with weight discrimination. The weight bias is that fat or chubby people are perceived as lazy, unmotivated, and lacking self-control. They are not thought to be clever or hardworking, contrary to the thin privilege, which suggests that individuals who are thin are hardworking, healthy, and disciplined. An example of where this bias is the reaction of people if an overweight individual is tired compared to if a thin person is tired. The fatter person will be met with negative reactions, such as people thinking they are lazy and greedy. The thin person will be met with sympathy and hospitality, being praised for working so hard.

In the movies listed above, these characters reflect the prejudice of "pretty privilege". Almost all characters who are overweight in these movies are shown to be greedy, dumb, and undisciplined. Their physical appearance is their main trait, followed by their obvious shallowness. They are used as comic reliefs, and their bodies are specifically animated or chosen to make it funny. Movie studios make amusing animations from certain body types because society finds that type funny, and thus movies promote these stereotypes and prejudices that the audience consumes. Research has found that people develop beliefs, theories, and expectations about the real world based on the media they consume. These expectations and beliefs shape the decisions made by the people. So if the audience of these movies consumes the weight discriminating comic reliefs, it could take part in their expectations and thoughts on overweight people. Movies reflect society's ideas, and the circle of consumer and producer goes on forever.[15]

6.2 What Is Beautiful Is Good

The biggest physical stereotypes in fiction are the "what-is-beautiful-is-good" and "what-is-ugly-is-evil" stereotypes. This can be found in most pieces of fiction or media in general. Very rarely does one see someone in the category of "ugly" as the protagonist of a story. Every fairy tale has a beautiful princess, a handsome prince and an ugly monster. The heroes are beautiful, valiant and morally correct while the villains lack the beauty and the moral. Antagonists are also the only characters that would have any sort of visual disfigurement or deformity, as it is not seen as beautiful.

Take the previous example of the *Harry Potter* series. In the third movie, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, the ending reveals a twist of the real villain, Peter Pettigrew, who has been a rat for the past 13 years. He is short, stout, and very filthy. Furthermore, he is missing a finger, has multiple warts

[15] Türkmen, M. (2021). How Much Do Children Interpret Television and Animated Film Contents? *ResearchGate*.

on his face and stuck out teeth. His appearance does not change much in the next five movies, and he is a big supporter of Voldemort. Voldemort's other followers, such as Bellatrix Lestrange, are not exactly pretty, and have spent the last years in Azkaban, making them a little crazy, in a dangerous, murderous way. The years of prison have yellowed their teeth, and they all move and act a little crazily. Voldemort himself has a facial deformity, as he has a snake-like nose. His skin is the colour of bones, and he does not look natural or human.

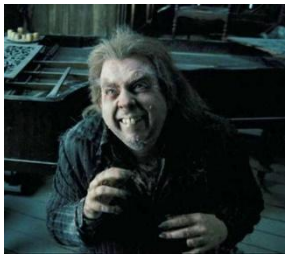

Image 4: Peter Pettigrew is missing a finger, has multiple warts on his face, and stuck out teeth.

There are many researches that show that all humans judge other people with the beauty-is-good stereotype. Even though what one finds attractive varies from person to person, beauty is not always in the eye of the beholder. Psychological research shows that when encountering someone with facial disfigurements, one keeps a greater physical distance from them, and the brain projects a cardiovascular response similar to the reaction of feeling threatened. Attractiveness most strongly influences the judgement of a person's morality. The first thing people want to know about each other is whether their morality corresponds to their own. To judge a character, people over-rely on heuristics, mental shortcuts when making decisions that can lead to misjudgements, which take into account the physical appearance of a person. Unattractive people are more commonly judged immoral, thus bad, by other people, whereas beautiful people are believed to be more trustworthy, hence the pretty face to promote pretty much everything.

Another explanation for this stereotype and the discrimination against unattractive people is the behavioural immune system. This behavioural immune system is a psychological mechanism that has evolved to keep us away from potential diseases, particularly from disease-contaminated objects. Its main way of keeping us away from such objects is by projecting the feeling of disgust and revulsion. Since we as humans cannot see bacteria and viruses, the behavioural immune system uses visual signs of diseases as a trigger to set off these emotions. This can lead to many false alarms, which then lead to prejudices. Facial disfigurements, while mostly not caused by disease, are associated with the presence of disease. Therefore, people show disease-avoiding-like behaviour toward people with facial disfigurements, like avoiding physical contact and keeping a greater distance. Furthermore, people judge those with facial disfigurements to violate disease-related purity norms, like not caring for basic hygiene, as opposed to those who are attractive. So, the bias we have against unattractive people is partly a protection system generated by our brain.[16]

A further study researched whether Disney animated movies promote the usage of the beauty-is-good stereotype in children, by first looking at a character's physical appearance and predict their personality, and the by exposing children to either a film that uses the beauty stereotype, or one that does not. The outcome of the second study was that the children rated the attractive film as better than the unattractive film, but they did not increase the usage of the stereotype on their surrounding company.[17]

[16] Zaragoza, A. (2022, March 3). Physical Attractiveness Influences Perceptions of Morality. Psychology Today.
[17] Bazzini, D. G., Curtin, L. A., Joslin, S., Regan, S. M., & Martz, D. M. (2010). Do animated Disney characters portray and promote the beauty-goodness stereotype? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 40(10), 2687-2709

7. Clichés in fiction

This part of the *memoire* will be about what conceptual clichés come up in fiction, where one can find these, and how it impacts and affects us.

7.1 The Hero's Journey

The hero's journey, or the hero's quest, is a common storyline in fiction. Also known as monomyth, the hero's journey revolves around the protagonist going on an adventure, learning important lessons such as leadership skills and teamwork, and coming back victorious and transformed, in a good way. In the book *A Hero With A Thousand Faces*, written by Joseph Campbell, the author describes the several stages in a monomyth, which in his opinion are 17, but one can reduce and summarise them into three. The first stage is the departure, which includes the setting and normal life for the hero, the call to adventure, usually by a divine being, the refusal to go, then meeting up with a mentor or superior, and then overcoming the first challenge. The second stage is the initiation in which the hero finds their allies, overcomes several trials with them, comes to the last stage of the quest, defeats or does what they must, and gets the reward. The final stage is the return, which is self-explanatory. The hero returns victorious and changed in a personal development way.[18]

In a way, this trope is similar to the Chosen One, which will come later, just with more story around it. Take the movie *Vaiana* (2016) for example. This Disney protagonist starts out as a young toddler who is chosen by the ocean to take back Te Fiti's heart to stop the decaying of nature. As she grows up, all Vaiana wants is to sail on the ocean, but her tribe won't allow it, and she slowly stops wanting it. She refuses to acknowledge her will to sail, until her grandmother dies and tells her to take back the heart. Thus, she departs. She teaches herself to sail until she finds Maui, her ally, and they beat some monsters on the way to Te Fiti, where they must battle a lava monster, the ultimate enemy. They succeed eventually after a major setback, and Vaiana, now able to sail and be who she wants to be, goes home victorious and everyone gets to sail again.

7.2 The Chosen One

The Chosen One cliché revolves around having a character, usually the protagonist, who is destined to save the world. They either have some special gift, a special lineage or something special happened to them. There is usually a prophecy, a vision, or some sort of divine sign that makes the character aware of their destiny. The Chosen One, chosen by a divine entity or force, is the inevitable hero of the story whose powers or lineage make them stronger than the average human, even though most of the time they and the audience are unaware of their destiny. They are born with their destiny, with no means to change it.

This cliché can be traced back to ancient times, when mythologies and storytelling were a way to entertain people. In Greek mythology, almost all heroes have some sort of divine parentage or lineage, which make them stronger than other fighters in ancient Greece. Heracles and Perseus are both sons of Zeus, the king of the gods, and Heracles is even a descendant of Perseus. Theseus is either the son of Poseidon, the god of the sea, or the son of Aegeus, the king of Athens, or in some cases both. All three of these heroes battle legendary monsters, such as the Hydra, Medusa and the Minotaur. Even those heroes with no divine lineage, like Jason and Atalanta, are guided by the gods to make them stronger than the average warrior. The Chosen One is also rooted in religion, as it is comparable to

[18] Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). *Hero's journey*. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

the religious concept of messiah, which is a saviour of a group of people in the Abrahamic religions, appointed either by holy oil or by their lineage.[19]

Many fantasy and science fiction book series use this cliché as the main plot of the story. Obviously, the famous classics like *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars* contain the Chosen One trope, but since they have already been mentioned, I wanted to show examples in some other books.

One series that uses the Chosen One trope connects well with the ancient Greek mythologies: the *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan. Throughout the five books of the first series, Percy Jackson is the son of Poseidon, the sea god. Even in a world where demigods are normal, Percy is a forbidden child, as the three big gods, Zeus, Poseidon and Hades, swore to never sire children again as a result of a prophecy that predicted a child of the big three making a decision that would either save or end the gods, and the fact that they are just too powerful. He is chosen to go on many quests, fight many monsters, and even though there are a few doubts on his Chosen One status, in the end, he does have to make the decision. Once that series is over, a new prophecy is made, that predicts seven great heroes who will save the world from Gaïa. Percy is one of these heroes, along with six other demigods who are all special in some way.

A further book series that uses this trope is the *Throne of Glass* series by Sarah J. Maas. On a continent corrupted by a brutal king who uses unnatural magic to enslave his people, Celaena Sardothien, later known as Aelin Galathynius, is the sole heir to a kingdom the continent thought was lost. Only she can gather up allies and forces against the dark king, and in later books finds herself fighting unnatural beings and the ancient king of darkness. Her lineage comes from two powerful heritages, which gives her unimaginable power with fire, and she is guided by gods and spirits towards her destiny, which was predetermined for her thousands of years ago.

The ways story tropes influence and affect us are actually quite simple. Tropes act as shortcuts for our brains confronted with certain situations. As our brains are wired to recognise and remember patterns, when confronted with stories, we are able to relate them to other stories, through these tropes. They give us a sense of comfort as they neatly fit into the schemas our brain has made, giving the pleasant feeling of solving a puzzle, or finding a friend in a crowd, the feeling of recognition. This enables cognitive resources to focus on things like character development when not confronted with the load of understanding the storyline. Furthermore, by cognitive framing, these tropes reinforce pre-existing beliefs we have. For example, reading about a “damsel-in-distress” reinforces the gender stereotype that women are helpless and need to be rescued by men. They can reflect societal norms or go against them, always reinforcing an idea or concept.[20]

Based on the sources I have read and my own experience, I have developed the theory that the Chosen One cliché has an effect on children’s initiative and how they see themselves. By constantly consuming movies, books and series, the Chosen One trope will come up many times. This creates or reinforces the belief that heroes are chosen by others. The characters might be ordinary children, or teenagers, someone the young consumer can relate to. Then this other being gives the protagonist powers, making them special in a way no one else is. But the chosen character hasn’t done anything to become chosen. Very often they stand apart from the crowd, but they never do anything different from any other child. This sort of passivity is rewarded with getting cool magical powers. It’s as if a hero needs to wait until someone or something gives them the power to do something and to make something of themselves. My hypothesis is that by watching and reading this content, children develop the belief

[19] Wikipedia contributors. (n.d.). The Chosen One (trope). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.
[20] Psychreg. (n.d.). *Psychology of Tropes*

that to be special, they don't have to do anything. They will someday just become amazing, with no practice, no training, nothing. They believe that to become special, you need someone else to tell you and to give you your specialty. You cannot become a hero without divine help. For example, watching a movie about a young child blessed with being naturally amazing at music, whether it's singing, or guitar or anything. But there's no practice behind it. The consumer will just see a naturally gifted singer. This young watcher will also feel like they want to be gifted with natural musical talent, and will wait until they realise, they aren't getting it. This sadness that you aren't special is heartbreaking, because fiction has made one believe that only magical or talented people are special. As if there's no value in a normal child. This "not-chosen-one-despair" is the time where childhood meets reality, in that teenage phase. Every child is still waiting for their Hogwarts letter. Waiting for a secret divine parentage. Secret powers. Just waiting and thinking, someday, it will just happen. And this passivity and waiting is what I feel comes from hoping you are the chosen one.

8. How does fiction shape, influence and affect us?

This section will concentrate on how the clichés, stereotypes and fiction in general shapes and affects us.

8.1 Political storytelling

Politics and political campaigns are often filled with statistics, facts, objective information. At least, that is what one should hope are the main factors for voters to choose their party. However, humans are influenced by something far beyond objective facts when it comes to their votes. Politics is all about connecting with people on an emotional level, on a personal level. Voters will more likely vote for someone who they feel understands their needs, who will solve their problems, help their community. This is where storytelling comes in.

The Art of Political Storytelling by Philip Seargeant reveals how and why storytelling enables politicians to gain voters and become successful. They use classic tropes like the ones discussed above to weave their story for the public. There has to be a monster, an evil that has taken advantage of the poor citizens, and a figurehead, a hero to save the people and to get back what they deserve. The politicians portray themselves as a saviour for the people, one person against the threat menacing the country. It might be the taxes, the immigrants, or just the current government in general, depending on the narrative of the politician. They promise the people a happy ending, much like in classical fairy tales and fiction. Seargeant evokes several techniques politicians use when weaving a story for their campaign. The first techniques are the narrative techniques, which are those that determine the way politicians present their stories. The book emphasizes the importance of framing in political storytelling. By framing an issue in a particular way, political actors can shape how voters perceive and respond to it. For example, framing an immigration policy as a matter of national security can evoke fear and support for stricter measures. By shaping the context and importance of an issue, politicians are able to gain more support than through hard facts. The author highlights the importance of simplifying complex problems by using metaphors and symbols to make them more relatable in their tale. Campaigns like "War on Drugs" use metaphors like that to create a vivid image in voters' minds that stick with them. As for psychological mechanisms used to bond with voters, stories engage with the emotional centres of the brain. This makes stories more powerful than facts alone, and politicians use this to create an emotional response within the targeted people. Furthermore, all humans have cognitive biases, which changes their perception of their decisions, such as the confirmation bias. People tend to favour information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, and are more sceptical towards information that goes against their beliefs. Politicians feed us stories that resonate with our beliefs to maximise voter support.

Image 5: A US anti-immigration poster that uses the word "alien" and "criminals" to describe immigrants. This makes them sound like something that doesn't belong, but is dangerous and has to leave immediately.

Furthermore, storytelling isn't only useful in politics, but also in communication and persuasion in general, and on a more daily basis. The greatest practitioners in our everyday lives are usually great storytellers. A doctor has to find a way to inform you about what illness you might have, by telling you what's happening in your body in a kind and compassionate way. A waiter at a restaurant will tell you all about the meal you're getting. This way of speaking through weaving stories is a really effective way of communication.

This is also a great persuasion strategy. Humans don't like their freedom challenged. We are built that way. This is why when someone tells us to believe something , we feel our independence challenged

and will go against it. This is where storytelling comes in. Your story can be about yourself, or a third party, the only thing that matters is that you don't bring up the thing you are trying to persuade at all. This is because for effective persuading, you want the other person to come up with the conclusion of what you want them to adopt themselves. It's comparable to being a film director. You set up the shot and the script for the audience to conclude something about the character. Like in the first shots of the villain, you aren't going to just tell the audience "This person is a villain and evil!" Instead, you will set up scenes where they destroy things, hurt people or take evil decisions, and the audience will come up with the conclusion that the character is evil. To persuade is to make a story of which the targeted person will draw to the conclusion your ultimate claim you want them to accept. [21]

8.2 Society and fiction

My final theory on this subject, based on all the sources and information I have found throughout the making of this *mémoire* is that, to summarise it, fiction shapes us the same way society shapes us. There is a simple reason to why I think this: fiction isn't made by aliens, nor does it just appear. It is made by humans, by us - humans, who are each part of a society, with norms and cultures. Those who consume it are also part of a society. The creator will integrate their culture into the fiction they make, and it will be above all consumed by people of the same society. The piece will mostly reflect the ideas of the creator, who has been taught cultural norms and social values, which will then come up in the piece of fiction, and will then be consumed by the same people. This circle of what influences fiction then leads to what influences us, and that goes back to fiction again.

Books, movies, TV shows, and all other types of fiction such as theatre are a part of culture, so it is just a part of what shapes us. This doesn't mean we are defined through what kind of fiction we consume. The way I see it is that it's more of subcategory of how society shapes us, as stories have often been used in the past as advertising, moral boosters or propaganda. But also normal, everyday Disney movies are part of the culture we grow up in, so even though it might not have an everlasting effect on us, fiction has and will continue to shape us as a part of society and culture.

[21] Abrahams, M. (Host). (2025). *Hollywood lessons for successful communication* (Episode 167). In *Think Fast, Talk Smart*. [Podcast].

9. Conclusion

To conclude this *mémoire,* fiction influences us in so many different ways, yet not really by itself. It comes as a part of society and culture, as a part of education and as a part of just free time. Not only do the stereotypes and clichés in fiction shape us, but they also affects the way our brains function and use storytelling as a form of communication and recognition. Originally, fiction was used to scare children into behaving and to prepare them for the world. However, fiction has become a whole lot more than fairy tales, and so its influence has changed too. Disney's movies portray many stereotypes, which turn out to be very memorable and can shape our view on body types, in the case of Disney princesses, and our view on cultures and people in movies such as *Aladdin*. Superhero costumes from Marvel can change the way young boys behave, by showing more stereotypical masculine behaviour, such as not helping, while in highly gendered masculine costumes, as opposed to being in a feminine or neutral costume. The stereotype of what-is-beautiful-is-good promotes the pretty privilege bias, and the belief that appearance defines a person's morality. Story tropes act as shortcuts for our brains, which end up making wrong decisions and assumptions because of these tropes. The same technique is used in political storytelling, which uses these tropes to easily convince people. Fiction ultimately shapes us the same way society shapes us, because it is a part of your social and cultural surroundings.

There were certain parts of this work that I didn't expect. I didn't think storytelling had a direct impact on the way we think and the way we can persuade others. I didn't expect to write about it either. And I think this is what really made writing this worth it. Because the things you don't expect are the things you ultimately learn and keep. For example, I never thought of storytelling as a form of persuasion, or that Disney movies had so many racist and sexist elements in them. I didn't know about the behavioural immune system, or how bloody and brutal original fairy tales really were. This *mémoire* turned out to have a whole lot more in it than I originally expected, which I find is kind of the point. It was the things that I wasn't looking for that made this really interesting and fun to write.

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