

If Barbie were a reindeer: How gender representations in *Rudolph* exemplify the need for teaching media literacy

KATIE BECK / DECEMBER 18, 2002

Numerous studies have shown that heavy media intake can alter how a person views the world. For example, people who watch a lot of television believe society is more violent than it truly is (otherwise known as the “mean world effect”). With this perception, they are more likely to be cautious and distrustful of other people. When applied to gender, cultivation theory suggests that people with media exposure will translate typical sex roles on TV and in film to real life. In short, fictional portrayals with all of their falsities and limitations become a map of reality for many people. While this is troubling in many ways, it is especially problematic with children’s media, where the audience is exceptionally vulnerable since children have little “real world” experience to balance their media intake. Unfortunately, many types of children’s media blatantly reinforce traditional gender roles, which can cultivate devastatingly restrictive ideals for little boys and girls.

The 1964 classic *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* not only emphasizing masculinity and success, but also downplays the roles of women, reducing them to one-dimensional sexual servants. While this film is outdated, because it is deemed a “classic,” thousands of children continue to be exposed to its stereotypes. By analyzing how gender is stereotyped in this movie, it becomes evident how sex roles are socially constructed and instilled at an early age. Once these are understood, the detrimental implications of gender cultivation, and modeling theory, can be discussed, along with some possible solutions to these harmful representations.

Through a thorough examination of the costumes, roles, and the plot itself, the negative gender stereotypes become apparent. Since this film humanizes animals and other creatures to tell its story, the producers used certain tools to indicate gender. From the images alone, the audience can immediately determine the sex of each reindeer, elf, and even toy. Since does and bucks are physically dissimilar, due to the absence of antlers and a lighter skin tone, it was unnecessary to add additional gender-identifying features. Apparently, for the producers, this distinction was not enough, at least not for the adolescent reindeer, who only had budding antlers. Jules Bass and Arthur Rankin, Jr., applied polka-dotted hair bows to the does and gave them long curled eyelashes to ensure that the audience understood the difference between the males and the females. This emphasis on gender also existed for the other creatures. If possible, the elves portrayed even more sex-specific characteristics. Like the traditional nursery, the male elves were clothed in blue, while the women were in pink. In addition, the men wore fur-trimmed suits with a big burly buckle. The women’s attire, on the other hand, consisted of bell-shaped dresses. The heads of the elves also differed by gender. Male elves had round bald heads (except for Hermie, but, of course, he was the misfit) and females had long blond hair, which was curled under. Besides the reindeer and elves, the toys were also gender typed by costume. Unlike the rest of the toys, the one female had long red pigtails and wore a pretty pink dress.

The masculine/feminine clothes immediately set the tone for the other sexist elements of this film. Along with costumes, the stereotypical sex roles of the characters reiterate socially acceptable roles for men and women. According to this film, the only function of females in society is to support the men. In *Rudolph*, all four speaking roles portray traditional roles. The first woman is Mrs. Donner. Even her title itself illustrates her insignificance. (It also makes you wonder if Donner is her husband’s first name or his last). With this title, which only identifies her by her husband’s name; she is not even her own person, merely a wife and mother. She is the typical stay-at-home Mom, basically a Mrs. Cleaver of the reindeer world. Mrs. Donner quietly dotes on Rudolph and her husband and, for the most part, is always shown in the cave. In fact, when she leaves the cave, it is alarming and scandalous. Only when she is safe again in

Christmastown is everything normal. Like Mrs. Donner, Mrs. Claus also represents the housewife. Plump and gray, she is not sexual. Instead, she fulfills a maternal role, constantly making sure Santa is eating enough and being considerate to the elves. Clarice represents another stereotypical role—the sexualized virgin. She first grabs Rudolph’s attention at the reindeer games, where, like high school cheerleaders, she and the other does are there to check out the new reindeer. When Rudolph first notices the girls, Clarice sticks out because she bats her long luscious deer eyelashes at him. The creators were surprisingly effective at sexualizing the female reindeer. In this scene, Clarice flirts with Rudolph, which sends him literally flying. After the reindeer community shuns him, Clarice still insists that he escorts her home. While this could be considered a bold masculine move, the way the movie frames her support of “the other,” she just appears oblivious to his nonconformity, and it is easy to dismiss her as a “silly female.” On the way home, they continue to flirt harmlessly. At the height of their playful banter (following her song), she kisses him on the cheek. Their chemistry is never acknowledged in the remainder of the film, even after they’ve matured. Ultimately, Clarice is the silenced conscience of the film, stereotyping women by her docile, yet compassionate nature, and objectified persona.

The rest of the female roles are background reindeer and elves. In their roles, they are constantly objectified. The reindeer, who do not actually speak, merely stand by Clarice and bat their eyes. Since they do not speak, they are even more objectified by both the other reindeer and the audience. The reindeer do not serve a purpose in this scene, other than being “eye candy” for the reindeer. Basically, they are Barbies, good-looking with zero depth. According to *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, this objectification is dangerous because it teaches girls to self-objectify, that is, to see themselves as nothing more than a body. Each physical part is then compared to the ideal, while “the entire person, however, has little or no value” (Beck, 2001). The female elves play a similar role. Pretty and silent, they blend into the background, like pink bell-shaped wallpaper. They don’t even participate in the “Hermie doesn’t want to make toys” telephone chain. The only time the female elves speak is in song. It seems the female elves exist solely to provide upper harmony in the elf songs, as well as to be dancing partners for the male elves in the final scene. Although the men all look similar, their playful antics (several shots show the elves pulling pranks on one another), along with their individual dialogue, distinguish the male elves from each other and humanize them so they are not just decoration.

The male roles also depict masculine stereotypes. Since there are more speaking parts for men, there are more diverse roles, but stereotypes, nonetheless. First, the function of Santa should be analyzed. In this film, Santa portrays a typical elder male. Like the archetypal old man, Santa is wise, yet clueless. He makes vital decisions affecting the entire world, yet he cannot remember to eat enough or realize the potential contribution of his misfits until the denouement of the film. He also resembles a regular old man, with his white beard, suspenders, and plump middle. Another stereotype is the explorer, exemplified by Yukon Cornelius. A bachelor at heart, he seeks silver and gold, staples of success in America. He is not concerned with marriage, conformity, or virtually anything but himself. Yukon Cornelius’ characteristics can easily translate to any eternal bachelor archetypes in society, such as the businessman or cowboy.

Besides the bachelor, the reindeer Comet also stereotypes the male athlete. Complete with whistle and baseball cap, Comet is the typical jock or coach. With his low voice, intolerance to non-sports activities (like flirting with other reindeer), natural authority, and leadership qualities, the character of Comet, at least in spirit, portrays the ideal manly man.

The structure of Christmastown itself illustrates the masculine authority in this society. There are several aspects of the social set-up that exemplify male dominance. In the fictional village of Christmastown, the political structure models an Americanized dictatorship, in that, by the end, the individual is praised and the voice of the people counts. Santa is the dictator, who makes the important decisions, such as who will fly the sleigh. Under Santa, there are two branches: the elves and the reindeer. The head elf, male, of

course, runs the toy factory and maintains order within the lower elves. The reindeer branch is headed up by Donner, Rudolph's father. He guides the seven reindeer below him. A subdivision of the reindeer department is the flying training program, with Comet the reindeer as the instructor. Santa, the head elf and reindeer, as well as the chosen elves and reindeer, hold all the power in this society. Since there are no women in these positions, the female opinion does not matter. In fact, this is emphasized in "The Reindeer Games" chapter when Comet, after discovering Rudolph's secret, declares, "We're not going to let Rudolph play in any reindeer games." Even though his daughter, Clarice, opposes her father's decision and supports Rudolph, as a woman, she cannot challenge authority, so any opinion she holds may as well not exist.

Along with the political structure of Christmastown, the uneven gender distribution further amplifies male domination. Throughout the film, only four females have speaking roles (Mrs. Donner, Clarice, Mrs. Claus, and the doll on the Island of Misfit Toys) compared to at least thirteen men. This dearth of female roles emphasizes the patriarchal society.

Besides the structure of Christmastown, the plot of this film deems what is socially acceptable for men and women. At the beginning of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, Rudolph is born and is immediately labeled "different" by his parents and Santa. Donner hides Rudolph's nose with mud and their secret remains safe until Rudolph hits puberty. Around the same time, Hermie the elf exclaims that he'd rather be a dentist than make toys. The rest of the elves are appalled, as word spreads down their assembly line. The scene then cuts to the reindeer games, where Rudolph has his first crush, which leads him to outflying the other reindeer. For a moment, Rudolph glows—all is well. Well, until he literally glows and everyone discovers his shocking deformity. Immediately, the other reindeers ostracize him. Similarly, Hermie skips elf practice and escapes. The misfits meet up, sing some songs, and meet an explorer. They wind up at the Island of Misfit toys, where they sing another song. During their stay at the I.O.M.T., Rudolph slips off into the night and returns to Christmastown, where he discovers that his family had left months ago to search for him. Rudolph finds his mother and Clarice imprisoned in the cave of the Abominable Snowmonster. He tries to rescue them, but fails. Luckily, Hermie and Yukon show up, save the day, and they all return to Christmastown as heroes. Finally, Rudolph leads the sleigh and ultimately saves Christmas.

This plot emphasizes male dominance and significance in several ways. First, both the protagonists and antagonists are entirely male. Women only play minor roles. Even when they leave Christmastown to search for Rudolph, which, if they had succeeded they would have been heroines, they fail desperately, becoming victims themselves. These damsels in distress nearly cost Rudolph his life. This signifies the gross mistake the women made by trying to do "men's work." The "rags to riches" theme of this film does not even apply to the women, as exemplified by Clarice's song "There's Always Tomorrow." In this song, Clarice sings, "There's always tomorrow, for dreams to come true," yet she doesn't seem to possess any of her own dreams, other than supporting Rudolph as a good woman. In fact, while this film addresses the American ideal of individualism, the struggle for a woman's independence is nonexistent. This film is a blatant supporter of non-conformity and self-sufficiency—but only for men. Women, like Mrs. Donner and Mrs. Claus, should remain unidentified except by their married connections.

The discourse used plays an integral role in reinforcing tradition. Since the film is narrated by Burl Ives, from the beginning, the story is told through a male perspective, which causes the movie to be even more male-focused, further minimalizing the female roles. This narration also shapes how the movie is perceived through the word choices and opinion on the unfolding events. In the scene where Donner decides to search for Rudolph, the narrator says, "Mrs. Donner wanted to go along, naturally, but Donner said, 'No, this is man's work.'" Ives, as Sam the Snowman, then refers to Donner as "the man of the house." Of course the women do search for Rudolph and end up in the Abominable Snowmonster's lair.

Once again, Sam makes a sexist remark, stating, “the best thing to do is to get the women back to Christmastown.” Sam singles out the women, implying that they are more fragile and vulnerable than the rest of the group, which is interesting since they were unharmed by the monster, while Rudolph suffered a concussion.

Between the characters, directly sexist dialogue does not exist, unless you consider the absence of communication with the female characters sexist. For the most part, the women are restricted to one-dimensional phrases such as, “Eat, Papa, eat!” or “Rudolph is a wonderful name.” They do not have an effect on the story but serve to support the male characters.

Throughout *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer* traditional gender stereotypes prevail. This is significant because the main audience of this film is children, who are the most susceptible to media influences. As demonstrated by cultivation and modeling theories, this gender-typing has a strong effect on children’s attitudes and behavior. Cultivation studies the difference between perceived mediated reality and actual reality (Bryant and Zillman, 2002). With this theory, children who watch gender-typed shows should believe that in real life, people follow traditional roles more than they actually do. In a study by N. Rothchild (1984), it was found that children with prolonged exposure to media featuring traditional roles favored these roles after viewing and believed them to be more prevalent than children who were not exposed. These children “were more likely to stereotype both gender-related activities (e.g., cooking, playing sports, etc.) and gender-related qualities (e.g., warmth and independence)” (Bryant and Zillman, 2002, p. 53). A similar study by Michael Morgan confirmed these findings—gender-typed media cultivates children to believe that “women are happiest in the home raising children” and “men are born with more ambition than women” (Bryant and Zillman, 2002, p.53).

If the media produces these effects, do we really want our children to perceive the world as a place where people are limited to gender roles? We need to consider these implications prior to exposing children to faulty media representation. Media that features traditional sex roles not only influences a child’s perception of reality, but also impacts how he/she will behave, as explained by the modeling theory of mass communication. This theory, developed by Herbert Blumer suggests that children copy what they see on TV or in films, using these media as “guides to etiquette, dress, mannerisms, and beautifications” (Lowery and DeFleur, 1995, p. 40). With *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, this means that after viewing this film, children will be more likely to mimic this behavior in order to fit into traditional gender roles.

Now that the problem of harmful media effects has been examined, solutions to this problem need to be discussed. There are several possible solutions to the problem of gender-typing. One such answer would be to hold the media themselves accountable. Since it is obvious that stereotyped gender roles in the media have a direct effect on children’s perceptions and behavior, we must question if it is socially responsible to produce or even air programs that reinforce these roles. Communitarianism, when applied to ethical theory, recommends evaluating the impact of an individual’s decision on the community (Patterson, 2002). Because the media targets a large audience, it is especially crucial that overall effects of society be considered. In this case, do reinforcing gender roles, which ultimately lead to a child’s skewed perception of reality and modeling of these behaviors, benefit the mass population? It is unlikely that encouraging the media to be socially responsible will actually enact a change. Certain formulas work on TV and in film, most of which perpetuate gender stereotypes. Since these types of programs are almost guaranteed to produce high revenue, production companies will continue to make stereotypical programs, especially as the media conglomerates grow, eliminating independents. The practical solution, then, does not lie with changing programs themselves, but educating children.

The implications of teaching critical analysis of the media to children are significant. By becoming active viewers, children will not be blindly shaped by these false representations, but will recognize and think

about them. The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion (ELM) illustrates the core effect of teaching media literacy (Petty et. al., 2002). According to this model, people who are not well informed of an issue process information through a peripheral route. Through this route, the viewers do not question the messages they receive, they only react with altered affective state (2002). This path of persuasion can be very effective at shaping attitudes and behaviors of the unformed through simple messages. Because children naturally process information through this peripheral route, they are easily swayed by a few images, ideas, or even lines of dialogue. So, by this model, children without critical media education could be quite influenced by the gender-stereotypes in *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. The women in that film were accepted because fit traditional roles. Likewise, the uneducated child would want to be liked, so he/she would mimic these roles.

While the media illiterate process persuasion messages the peripheral route, those with critical analysis background take in information through the central route. This channel “involves effortful cognitive activity whereby the person draws on prior experience and knowledge in order to carefully scrutinize all of the information” (Petty et. al., 2002, p.165). As the viewer receives the messages, he/she actively questions the validity of the information and decisively agrees or disagrees based on past beliefs and experiences. The data is then integrated into the viewer’s cognitive structure (Petty et. al., 2002). Applied to *Rudolph*, a media literate child could acknowledge and identify the stereotypes and then analyze if these gender representations concur or conflict with the his/her own beliefs. The child would then be able to question why these traditional roles are still perpetuated and consider their effects on other children and society.

As demonstrated by the peripheral and central processing routes, people who are media savvy perceive messages in a vastly different way than the uneducated. Do we want our children to be passive drones, accepting all messages without thinking (like the Magic Bullet Theory of communication) or should children be active in their media experience? The Elaboration Likelihood Model allows us to see these implications of teaching critical analysis. Unless the purpose of this gender-typed propaganda is to inevitably revert society back to the Dad-as-the-breadwinner days, it is imperative that we educate children on the limitations of these roles.

Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer is a Christmas classic that many families enjoy annually. However, it is not just a cute tale of acceptance and individualism, but a tragic portrayal of traditional gender roles. The women of Christmastown are quiet and pretty—content in their domestic settings. The men, on the other hand, have dreams and aspirations, can have clear friendships, and have a voice in the community. With these blatant stereotypes, vulnerable audiences are misconstrued to believe that these cookie-cutter roles are the only possibilities for their gender. And, although some would argue that this is just a movie and therefore is irrelevant to the real world, studies on objectification, cultivation, and modeling have shown that children’s beliefs, attitudes, and behavior are extensively shaped by these media representations. Since the media is after all, a business, it is unlikely that they will stop reinforcing stereotypes in their programs, so it is up to educators and parents to reduce the drastic effects through media literacy programs. As shown by the ELM, teaching critical analysis can shift the way a child processes information, from the brainwashing peripheral route, to the active central path.

By informing kids, we are enabling them to make their own choices, not only about gender, but about media messages in general. The mass media can be a great teaching tool if used correctly. To ignore such an integral part of our society would be as harmful as not teaching children how to read. In a sense, this is what critical analysis does—teaches kids how to properly read the infinite messages launched by the mass media. Is it okay then to show *Rudolph*? Yes, along with a lesson. Have children identify the stereotypes and then discuss their validity and applicability following the film. It could become the new family tradition.