

Pocahontas, Disney's Well-Intentioned Stain: A Film Review

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Disney's "Pocahontas" is a film inspired by the historical figure of the same name and revolves around English settlers arriving to the New World and coming into contact with an Indian tribe. The film focuses on the developing relationship between Pocahontas and John Smith, one of the settlers, and attempts to critique the consequences of ethnocentrism and bigotry. In trying to make a stance against prejudice towards Native Americans, however, the film itself implements Indian stereotypes while also distorting the true story about the real-life Pocahontas. Disney's attempt to create a false equivalency between Natives and colonizers, utilization of the ecological Indian image, and continued portrayal of the "savage" stereotype all aid in the short-falling of the film's message. Though Disney is well-intended in trying to create a positive representation of Native Americans, it ultimately does more damage in trivializing Pocahontas's story and turning it into little more than another princess tale.

A recurring theme throughout "Pocahontas" is an effort to portray ethnocentrism as something that is present in both Native and European cultures. Though the film mostly emphasizes the prejudice that the English settlers had towards the Native tribe, there are still points where the Indian characters are shown to express the same kind of bigotry towards the white colonizers. The film's song "Savages" displays this false equivalency boldly, depicting both groups chanting the same biased perceptions they had of each other. What is ironic about this theme is that the film also gives some logical reasoning for why the tribe developed prejudices towards the settlers. In particular, there is a scene where a conversation is happening between Governor Ratcliffe and Wiggins, two of the English settlers. When Ratcliffe asks Wiggins why

the Indians had attacked them, the latter replies “because we invaded their land, cut down their trees, and dug up their earth?” Wiggin’s line alone proves that Disney is aware of the fact that there are legitimate reasons for the Native characters to develop hostility towards the colonizers, yet they chose to instead portray ethnocentrism as a two-way street despite the fact that it was the English settlers that invaded the tribe’s land first. Pocahontas herself, then, becomes a tool for the film to encourage compassion and empathy towards the two supposedly bigoted groups.

In a story where two different cultures hold prejudices against one another and are at war with each other, Pocahontas is the only character that seems to be rational and reasonable. She acts as a teacher for both the Natives and the settlers; her father even proclaims during the climax of the film that his daughter “speaks with a wisdom beyond her years” and that “she comes with courage and understanding.” In conjunction with this portrayal of Pocahontas is the use of the ecological Indian stereotype; she is often depicted running through the wild in the film and is at harmony with the natural world around her. Pocahontas’s free spirited personality is closely associated with the stereotype, the images of her closeness with the wilderness serve as a metaphor for her open-mindedness and understanding nature. The film’s main song “Colors of the Wind” displays this theme heavily as Pocahontas takes John Smith and shows him all that her tribe’s land has to offer, and ultimately what the English settlers would be taking away if they continued their mission. All while trying to convince him to let go of his ethnocentric views and understand a world that clearly did not know, Pocahontas and Smith are seen running through the wild and indulging in the vast freedom of the undisturbed New World. The ecological Indian image is further cemented by the destruction caused by the settlers as they are often seen chopping down trees and mining the land for gold, destroying the perfect wilderness that Pocahontas represented. Although the stereotype was used with the intent to create a positive and harmonious image of

Pocahontas, it ultimately led to the continued instigation of an inaccurate representation of Natives that simply romanticized their culture further.

While Pocahontas herself may have been portrayed as the only sensible character in the film, the rest of her tribe suffered the fate of being depicted as both the victims and perpetrators in the story. Though it was clear that the English colonizers were the more antagonistic group, the Native characters were still represented as somewhat villainous due to Disney's aforementioned attempt to establish equivalency between the two cultures. In doing so, the infamous "savage" stereotype was somewhat utilized among the tribe, though not as heavily as previous film portrayals of Natives. The tribe is relatively peaceful throughout the beginning of the film, but they grow hateful and aggressive as tensions rise with the English settlers. During what is arguably the starkest song in the film, "Savages," both the Indian tribe and the colonizers are shown preparing for a grand battle against each other and both perceiving the other group as the savage ones. Just as the settlers showed little empathy towards the tribe, the Native characters acted blindly in their anger and were determined to fend them off once and for all. Kocoum, the man Pocahontas was set to marry, displayed the savage stereotype clearly when he lunged after John Smith as he was kissing Pocahontas and attempted to kill him. At this point in the film, Smith had already been established as the only colonizer so far to have changed their mindset and was willing to understand the tribe's culture, so Kocoum's assault diminished him to an irrational character who acted impulsively out of hatred. Even after Kocoum was killed soon after, the "savage" stereotype continued to persist through the anger that the other tribe members had towards Smith once they arrived to the scene and planned to have him killed; it wasn't until Pocahontas's intervention later on that the tribe finally let their prejudices go. Although Pocahontas herself got the privilege of

being portrayed as wise and empathetic, the rest of her tribe was subjected to the harsher “savage” image before they too could become understanding.

Disney’s attempt to create a positive representation of Natives in “Pocahontas” becomes muddled from its continued perpetuation of Indian stereotypes. While Pocahontas upheld a romantic fantasy of Native life rooted in nature, the other tribal characters maintained a savage image that equated them to being just as bigoted as the very people invading their land. In trying to paint both the Indian tribe and the English settlers as ethnocentric, Disney does more harm than good by making the Native characters partly liable for the story’s tensions and leaving Pocahontas solely responsible for changing everyone’s minds. The film fails to break away from the practice of utilizing stereotypes to represent Natives which consequently undermines its well-intended representation of Indians. Although Disney tries to pave the way for the better portrayal of Native Americans, it instead commercializes Pocahontas’s story and continues the common practice of exploiting Native culture and upholding an inaccurate fantasy.