Long Live the King:
The Effect of Character Death on
Disney’s Critical and Box Office Success

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Abstract

The Disney Company and the films it produces are a major part of American culture. Countless children grow up watching these films, idolizing their characters. Disney animated films remain popular and beloved by their audiences and new releases are eagerly anticipated. This study examines why certain Disney animated films enjoy huge critical and box office success, despite, or perhaps because of, their dark themes, including the death of parents or siblings. I have closely analyzed *Bambi*, *The Lion King*, and *Big Hero 6* and their critical reception. Exploring narrative theory as a cultural convention and how death is represented to audiences, I argue that these Disney narratives are successful partly because they offer a constructive way for adults and children to approach the topic of death. Results of this study have implications on the film industry and film narrative.
Introduction

Throughout history humans have been creating and sharing stories with one another. Starting as simply spoken words told over a dying fire, narratives have progressed from cave drawings to song, poetry, fiction, and theater, to the many forms of media existing today, including film. From generation to generation, storytellers of all kinds have mastered their crafts and have found countless ways to capture the attention of their audiences, conveying meanings and expressing deep, resonant emotions. Over the years, these narratives have served many different purposes and have become deeply ingrained in culture. Since around the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, narrative theorists have taken a psychological look at narrative purposes and how storytelling relates to the crafting of cultural and personal identities.

The narratives created or retold by the Walt Disney Company are one example of narrative power in American society today. Following the studio’s beginnings in the early 1920s, generations of children have grown up watching Disney’s films, idolizing their characters and singing their songs. Even into adulthood, classic Disney animated films remain loved and new releases are eagerly anticipated. Yet within many of these narratives aimed at children we find dark themes and potentially traumatic imagery. Death is one of the most common elements found in American films in general.\textsuperscript{1} In fact, there are “no differences in the number of death-related scenes” among the four main MPAA ratings, G, PG, PG-13, and R.\textsuperscript{2} Even though they contain dark content and themes, Disney films manage to attain high status within many homes and are cherished by families. The following study seeks to investigate why certain Disney

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animated films enjoy huge critical and box office success, despite, or perhaps because of, their
dark themes, specifically the death of parents or siblings.

**Narrative, the Mind, and Culture**

In order to better understand a culture’s fascination with death in children’s films, it is
important to first consider the relationship between narrative and the mind and the importance of
narrative in culture. Narrative psychology, a movement in the field that began in the mid 1980s,
seeks to “emphasize the importance of story-making for human understanding and action.”³
Postmodern theorists, heavily influenced by events of the 20th century, propose that our
understandings are mental constructs, distorted by “conceptual schemes, human biology, and
personal need and agendas.”⁴ A constructivist understanding of narrative psychology argues that
“narrative is the primary structuring scheme through which people organize and make meaning
of their interaction with self, others, and the physical environment.”⁵ Human beings make sense
of their world, of others, and of themselves through a cognitive process that analyzes an event
and its relationship to an outcome. Each event is parsed together into a larger, more meaningful
whole, an “unfolding story.”⁶ There is ongoing debate among scholars as to how this capacity for
narrative organization comes to be, whether it is an innate tendency or if it is a learned skill, a
product of an individual’s cultural environment. Regardless, both points of view agree that one’s
culture provides concepts and plots that lead to more meaningful experiences.

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³ Donald E. Polkinghorne, “Narrative Psychology and Historical Consciousness: Relationships
and Perspectives,” in *Making Sense of History*, vol.3, *Narration, Identity, and Historical
⁴ Polkinghorne, 4-5.
⁵ Polkinghorne, 5.
⁶ Polkinghorne, 5.
The cognitive processing of events into larger narratives happens mostly outside of an individual’s awareness in what Seymour Epstein calls the experiential system rather than the rational system. These processes, explains Polkinghorne, “do not simply process passively received information.” They instead are “directed by the focus of attention on those aspects of the world that are of interest to the person’s needs and desires,” the results of which is a story that can “give an integrating identity to the self and meaning to one’s actions and life experiences.” Values and norms within an individual’s culture are also used to construct meaning. The actions, events, and influences in a person’s life create a life story that shapes their identity, or how they differentiate themselves from their peers. Everyone has a self-narrative, a past, present, and future, and recalling memories and imagining future events are both forms of narrative structuring. “Having a memory,” notes Kenneth Gergen, “is to participate in a cultural tradition. To speak of one’s past is to enter into a tradition of talk for which the rules of well formed storying are apposite.”

Whether narrative capacity is innate or learned, retelling of past events and the creation of new narratives are traditions that are deeply rooted in human culture. A well formed story can have great personal, relational, and social utility. Within an individual, certain types of narratives may act as a motivator to achieve some end. Stories have the power to unite and define both small groups, like families, and larger groups, like entire cultures. Within a culture, stories function to generate, sustain, and transform cultural traditions. They are also used to share news and cope with tragedy. Stories and culture go hand in hand, providing evidence for the

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7 Polkinghorne, 5.
8 Polkinghorne, 6.
assertion that societal climate impacts what is produced creatively and how those works are received. Stories found in American culture, such as Disney narratives, have the ability to both reinforce and shape American values and norms.

Emotional expression is an important feature of narrative both individually and relationally. Emotions within narratives solicit “attention, sympathy, and intimacy” between the storyteller and his or her audience. Gergen argues that “emotions do not ‘have an impact on social life;’ they constitute social life itself,” and goes on to propose that “emotional expressions are culturally patterned forms of lived narrative.” Jürgen Straub takes the discussion of emotion in narrative further, arguing that a story’s purpose is to “involve listeners in the narrated events, to let them take part emotionally in the drama.” These emotions are often tied to the unexpected, surprising story elements, amplifying the unanticipated action. These abrupt elements, which may involve character death, are what draw and “spellbind” listeners and viewers.

David Bordwell, in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, describes constructivist cognitive and perceptual frameworks and their relation to narrative and film theory, seeking to explain how movies use fundamental principles of narrative representation, the film medium, and storytelling patterns to construct meaningful fictional narratives. Narration in film, Bordwell explains, is “the process whereby the film’s [plot] and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator’s construction of the [story].” Creating certain reactions within viewers. Unlike film

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11 Gergen, 113.
12 Gergen, 113.
14 Straub, 57.
scholars who assume a passive viewer, Bordwell argues that watching a film is a “dynamic, perceptual-cognitive process” and that audiences have an active role in the narrative process. Filmmakers, sometimes unknowingly, use principles of cognitive psychology to help audiences comprehend the narrative. Film techniques have been perfected over the years, often through trial and error, to facilitate presupposition and inference, which lead to understanding. When trying to make sense of a film, viewers rely on their prior knowledge and experiences. The film narratives then reward, modify, frustrate, or defeat the perceiver’s expectations as they search for coherent meaning. Emotion is then created by the interrupted or delayed fulfillment of these expectations. Audiences also use real-world knowledge and their awareness of narrative conventions to make inferences about characters and their emotions beyond what is explicitly expressed in the film. In a Disney movie, a viewer might enter the theater with the assumption that the film is for children. Since our culture idealizes childhood as carefree and threat-free, our expectations are then violated by the presence of violence and death within the narrative.

Death in Film

While film techniques shape our perceptions of the film itself, a film’s content has the power to shape our perceptions of the world. In a narrative context, death is used to create conflict, tension, and excitement: character death evokes sadness and sets up conflicts for surviving characters. It is easy for both film scholars, like Daniel Sullivan and Jeff Greenberg, and casual viewers to notice that death is a recurrent theme in “many of the best (and best-loved) films” across “genres, periods, nations, and directors” Sullivan and Greenberg see this as a

16 David Bordwell, Narration, xiii
“testament to the fact that human life is characterized by two particularly resonant psychological realities: the fear of death and the desire to overcome it.”19 Film is not the only narrative medium in which themes about mortality are present. Though “death is an uncommon topic in books written for young children,” it is a prevalent theme in literature across history.20 Death can be seen in the works of philosophers, poets, playwrights, and novelists. It is also common in fairy tales, which today are often associated with children and are the basis for many Disney films. Mary Anne Sedney discusses the important role literature, fairy tales in particular, has as a child learns to make sense of the world.21 The tales often come with life lessons or morals. A smart child would heed the tale’s warning. But, notes religious scholar Gary Laderman, “the association of fairy tales with children, and the assumption that they are integral to the socialization and development of children are recent phenomena.”22 Fairy tales and folk tales were originally told by adults to adult audiences at gatherings and spinning circles. Only within the last couple of centuries have they “joined the canon of children’s literature.”23 Nevertheless, children and adults are eagerly drawn to these narratives again and again.

Disney films, like any art form, are representations of reality viewed through a subjective creative lens with a certain conception of the world. When analyzing a film, it is important to consider the narrative, formal context of the film itself. It is also necessary to examine the film within its historical context. The way in which death is represented artistically reflects changes in

19 Sullivan and Greenberg, 1.
23 Laderman, 37.
societal attitudes toward death at the time the film was created. The opinions expressed by the filmmakers, especially in a studio as far reaching as Disney, have the power to impact cultural values and the reception of narratives involving death. Aimed towards children, these films can affect how young children perceive and think about death and how they approach the process of grief.24

Like many artists, Walt Disney was a “control freak” with the desire to create a better reality within his films.25 Interestingly though, these imagined realities include depictions of death, both realistic and sensational. Laderman notes Disney’s “propensity to focus on death in many of his early films,” despite it being a taboo subject in American society in the early 20th century.26 Though death is a driving force in many Disney narratives, the stories promote the idea that death and destruction can be overcome by “heroic action, unyielding optimism,…or miraculous intervention.”27 Disney’s films are infused with American values and virtues, making them “significant cultural artifacts in the history of attitudes toward death in America.”28 In a society where death is an uncommon topic of everyday conversation, viewers can confront and explore death, a universal human experience, from the comfort of their plush theater seats or safety of their living rooms. Parents can use films like The Lion King to discuss this difficult topic with their children. Death in cinema, viewed as a means of fantasy and catharsis, allows an individual to come to terms with typically repressed anxieties about their mortality. It may also serve as a coping mechanism and means of working through psychological issues. Cindy Dell

24 Sedney, 316.
26 Laderman, 44.
27 Laderman, 40.
28 Laderman, 44.
Clark explains that children “adopt symbols from the cultural narratives of an age-graded society (Ninja Turtles, Power Rangers, Mister Rogers, etc.) and particularize these symbols to relate to personal dilemmas and feelings.” Clark notes that adults turn to religion and other “supernatural forces as a means of healing. Such practices as religious healing, shamanism, and mythic intervention are widespread across cultures.” These myths act as a model or metaphor for the individual’s experiences, helping them cope.

Ways of thinking about death have changed throughout history which in turn has an impact on how the topic is approached creatively, especially for a cultural icon like the Disney franchise. Death has always been a social experience in Western culture. Families and friends come together to mourn the loss of their loved ones. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, death became less visible for middle and upper class citizens, becoming more private and institutionalized with new advances in medicine and technology. As death became more remote in everyday life, exposure to images of death in the media began to increase during the mid-20th century, a period marked by “severe economic turmoil, a second world war, scientific and technological revolutions, and other tumultuous social developments.” The 1960s brought many transitions in film as filmmakers moved away from the studio system of Hollywood’s golden age. Prior to the 60s, deaths were often suggested, rather than shown on screen. Portrayals of death, influenced by 20th century events, became more realistic and more graphic, a trend that continues today.

29 Dell Clark, 142.
30 Dell Clark, 141.
31 Sullivan and Greenberg, 8.
32 Laderman, 39.
33 Sullivan and Greenberg, 9.
Film Selection

The films chosen for analysis include three Disney animated feature films, *Bambi* (1942), *The Lion King* (1994), and *Big Hero 6* (2014), following a selection strategy based on the content analysis presented by Cox, Garrett, and Graham.34 While Cox et al analyzed all Disney animated films in which “a death occurred or was a theme in the plotline,” these three films were chosen as a focus because a significant death occurs during each film, which acts as a major plot driving device, with a strong impact on the development of the main character and the progression of the story. For the purposes of this research, a significant death is defined as the death of a character close to the story’s hero, such as a parent or sibling, with whom the audience has developed an attachment. These deaths are represented in the films as either implicit, where a character is assumed to be dead based on witnessed events, or explicit, in which an actual body is shown. These types of deaths are potentially traumatic, especially for young audiences, because the viewer must actually witness the death of a character with whom they have built an attachment. It is common in children’s film for death to be implicit and remain unacknowledged. Classic and contemporary Disney films feature absent mothers or other parental figures, but these films rarely focus on or even mention those absences. In films such as *Cinderella* or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, it is apparent or perhaps mentioned that a death has taken place previously, but we do not see the actual death or watch as the affected characters grieve or deal with the loss. Therefore, these films are deemed out of the scope of the present study.

The losses portrayed in *Bambi, The Lion King*, and *Big Hero 6* are also significant because it is a child who experiences the loss of a loved one firsthand. Adult characters

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experience loss in movies like *Up* or *Finding Nemo*. Carl, the main character in Pixar’s *Up*, grieves the loss of both a child as a result of miscarriage and later his beloved wife. Marlin the fish, in *Finding Nemo*, also loses his wife in addition to all but one of his children. While an adult watching these films will certainly be able to understand or relate to Carl and Marlin, children can more easily identify with a child seen on screen and understand their loss. The loss of a spouse or unborn child holds little meaning for a child, but all age groups can understand what it means or imagine what it might be like to lose a parent or guardian figure. The films were also chosen because they come from different eras in Disney animation history, which helps reveal how death is depicted over time. As mentioned by Cox et al, only one film was chosen from before the 1970s because there was an overall lack of death related events or themes in children’s films released during that time.35

**Bambi**

The Walt Disney Studio, now one of the biggest, most powerful, and most recognizable companies in the world, began humbly in 1923, producing short cartoons. When Disney saw his short films gain popularity in movie houses across America, he decided to begin work on an animated feature film in 1934. After three years, the first cel animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, was released in December 1937, kicking off what is now known as the golden age of Disney animation and revolutionizing the film industry. *Snow White* was an immediate hit and soon took the title of highest grossing film of all time, which it held until *Gone With the Wind* took its place in 1939.36 The studio’s success during the golden era continued with the releases of recognizable classics *Pinocchio* (1940), *Fantasia* (1940), and

35 Cox, Garrett, and Graham, 271.
Dumbo (1941). Because the company had almost no foreign market and money was tight on the home front, Disney’s monetary stability faltered after Bambi hit theaters on August 21, 1942. With an estimated budget of $1.7 million, the film only grossed $1.64 million.

Though it struggled financially in the beginning, Bambi has gone on to accumulate almost $300 million worldwide following six re-releases spanning almost five decades. The film was last released in theaters in 1988, but remains popular and is considered a classic today. With the capabilities of home entertainment extending its life beyond the theater, Bambi has been enjoyed by generations of children and their families. Bambi’s success can also be seen outside the box office. It was nominated for three Academy Awards for its score and won four other awards. The original film’s continued popularity encouraged the production of a sequel expanding on the relationship between Bambi and his father, which was released in 2006, 64 years after Bambi’s initial release. After polling more than 1,500 film artists, critics, and historians, The American Film Institute also ranked Bambi number three in their list of the ten best animated feature films of all time.

Despite its lasting popularity with audiences of all ages, Bambi has been met with criticism from many angles, many of which can be traced back to perhaps the film’s most memorable scene, the fatal shooting of Bambi’s beloved mother at the hands of a phantom menace. At first glance, Bambi’s story seems fairly straightforward with limited emotional depth, especially to a modern audience. With minimal dialog (less than a thousand words spoken), expressive gestures, and a powerful score, it feels more like a silent film, which is not surprising.

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since sound was only added to film fifteen years before its release. We are not given much explicit insight into how characters are feeling or what they are thinking, besides the incredibly talkative Thumper, Bambi’s rabbit friend. Further analysis, however, reveals how deeply a seemingly surface level blade can cut.

Unlike the triumphant, celebratory dawn at the opening of *The Lion King*, *Bambi* quite literally paints a different picture. The subdued blue, black, and green watercolors bring the audience into a quiet, innocent forest scene as animals sleepily come to life and make their way to the birthplace of the baby prince. Similar to *The Lion King*, *Bambi* is the story of a life, though a much humbler one. The first 40 minutes follow baby Bambi as he learns to navigate his new home with his kind and gentle mother and lively forest pals by his side. As he grows older, Bambi’s innocence lessens with each new experience. Violent thunderstorms and harsh winters are all too common in nature. One threat, however, stands above the natural phenomena: Man. A joyful romp on the meadow is cut short when chilling crows’ calls signal danger for the forest creatures. The quiet gray tones of the meadow turn orange as all the animals scatter. Bambi and his mother struggle to keep together among the stampede and sound of gunshots. Once the two deer reach safety, Bambi asks, “Why did we all run?” to which his mother responds, “Man was in the forest.”

Unfortunately, this is not Bambi’s only encounter with Man, a faceless threat to all the inhabitants of the forest. After a rough winter with little food, Bambi and his mother are excited to find a patch of spring grass. As the pair enjoy their rare treat, ominous music, sounding like the Disney equivalent of the *Jaws* theme, and an animated equivalent of a crane shot signal a coming threat. Bambi’s mother hears a sound and a close up reveals her worry as she looks

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40 *Bambi*, directed by David Hand (Walt Disney Pictures, 1942), DVD (2005).
around for danger. She shouts to return to the thicket and we hear a gunshot as the two run for
safety. “Faster, Bambi,” she calls, “Don’t look back!” Bambi runs as fast as he can through the
snow and we hear another louder, more final gunshot. Bambi makes it back to the thicket, happy
that “we made it, Mother!” His mother, however, does not return. Concerned, Bambi beings to
look for her, calling, “Mother where are you?” Looking small and lost among the large trees, he
begins to cry. Just then, the wise prince of the forest appears. “Your mother can’t be with you
anymore,” he tells Bambi. Bambi is silent as shock then sadness crosses his face. We learn that
the wise prince is Bambi’s father and the two exit the scene as it fades to black. Unlike the death
of Simba’s father, Mufasa, in The Lion King, we do not see Bambi’s mother when she is shot by
the hunters and her body is never shown to confirm the death. The wise prince does not explicitly
say she has died. The audience is left to make the connection themselves, relying on cues from
the narrative. We are not shown the effect of his mother’s death on Bambi either. Gary Laderman
writes that the scene’s “lingering power…is the way in which the emotional weight is left for the
audience to bear.”41 The “profound emotional response is erased from the narrative.”42 The film
opens again quite jarringly with a joyous song and the bright colors of spring. A viewer can only
assume that his mother’s death forces Bambi to grow up—we see him next as a mature deer,
antlers and all, and it is implied that he has been away, presumably with his father, for an
extended period of time. This portrayal of death and grief is a product of the film’s time. Before
the 1960s, deaths were not often shown on screen, as is the case with Bambi’s mother. The film
also adheres to traditional ways of approaching grief. “Death is marked by absence,” writes
Sedney, “and traditional models of mourning were based on the premise that the bereaved must

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41 Laderman, 41.
42 Laderman, 41.
learn to accept that absence and emotionally separate from the loved one.” They must let go of the past and move on.

Though depicted differently than the murder in featured in *The Lion King*, it is still a powerful scene. The death of Bambi’s mother has remained in the memories of children and adults for almost 75 years. Interestingly, however, the animated version of *Bambi* is incredibly tame compared to its written counterpart and the originally conceived script created by Disney and his team. Even so, it remains a product of its time. *Bambi* is based on the Austrian novel, *Bambi: A Life in the Woods*, written in 1924 by Hungarian writer and extremist Felix Salten. Sportsman and conservationist George Reiger writes that “death is the central theme of *Bambi*… Something fears dying, or does die in terrible agony, in almost every chapter.” Matt Cartmill continues the description, adding that the novel’s “poetic prose provides a backdrop of intense color and beauty in front of which [Salten’s] animal characters suffer and bleed and limp and die awful uncomprehending deaths.” Bambi must watch as his family and friends fall to the hunters, “satanic two-legged [demigods] they call Him with a capital H.” Salten cast mankind and hunting in a terrible light and Disney almost followed his novel more closely. Early scripts were lighthearted, similar to Disney’s previous Silly Symphonies, but as the threat of war in Europe became more intense, so did *Bambi*. Like the novel, it began to focus more and more on cruelty and violence at the hands of men. In this darker version, the audience would have witnessed Bambi’s shooting and the fatal shooting of his mother. Intense imagery continues with Thumper’s violent death. The humans are eventually brought to justice when Bambi’s father

43 Sedney, 318.
44 Cartmill.
45 Cartmill.
46 Cartmill.
47 Cartmill.
shows him the burned body of a man after the fire. Luckily for viewers, these ideas were eventually abandoned.

The weight of mankind’s hand in nature, however, is still apparent, the result of which caused significant pushback by some critics. Harold Titus of the Saturday Evening Post wrote that Bambi captivated audiences and put hunting “in a most unfavorable light.” During a time in the United States when deer were starving to death during the winter due to overpopulation and meat was rationed because of the looming threat of war, states desperately tried to encourage hunting. A “speedy death by a rifle bullet might be more humane than lingering starvation,” legislators argued. Hunting would certainly have helped ease the meat shortage. But just as these arguments began to pick up steam, Bambi came along to change the public’s mind about hunting once more and has not wavered much since.

Writing fifty years later in 1993, Matt Cartmill notes that many hunters still “blame this anti-hunting sentiment on Walt Disney” and his film about the little deer. Cartmill quotes a 1973 speech by Warren Page, an editor for hunting focused Field and Stream. In this speech, Page argues that Disney has brainwashed a generation, “deliberately misinforming viewers of basic biological facts.” But Bambi bashing aside, the popularity of the film and its subsequent messages supporting wildlife causes have had a “wide and deep influence on modern attitudes toward hunting, wildlife, and the wilderness” to this day. Audiences are able to sympathize with cartoon deer in a fictional world and extend that sympathy to the physical world. Hundreds of moviegoers flooded their state legislative offices following Bambi’s release with letters

49 Titus.
50 Cartmill.
51 Cartmill.
protesting the more liberal game laws. Here we see how Disney acts as both a cultural lens and a cultural megaphone. Disney films can be effective at causing a shift in thinking because they “express thoughts that we are predisposed to think for other reasons.” The studio uses its position as a public media platform to promote new ideas and ways of thinking or to reinforce existing ones.

Similar to ideas about hunting, Disney films like *Bambi* also mold and reinforce cultural thinking through the choices the filmmakers make about how to represent death in family films. Since *Bambi*’s initial release critics have had mixed opinions on whether or not parents should allow their children to watch the film. A reviewer for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* writing under the pseudonym Mae Tinée in 1942, notes that *Bambi*’s “magical whimsy” appeals to both the child and the adult within older viewers. The review does not contain any notion of *Bambi* being inappropriate for young viewers. The film’s sweetness will leave its viewers smiling and singing songs even though it has its sad moments. “But life is like that,” the reviewer says, “and Disney always holds his mirror up to life.” The word choice here is interesting. Disney films act as a representation or reflection of life, not reality. Through film, Disney has the power to alter or perfect reality yet the films are not free of the pains of the physical realm. Where the filmmakers could eliminate the cause for or existence of death, they choose to include it in their representation of life.

Even though the actual death is not shown, Nicki Gostin of *Newsweek*, writing after *Bambi*’s DVD release in 2005, describes the shooting of Bambi’s mother as “one of the most

52 Titus.
53 Cartmill.
54 Mae Tinée, review of *Bambi*, directed by David Hand, Walt Disney Pictures, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 16, 1942.
55 Tinée.
disturbing death scenes in the history of animation,” a death critics like Roger Ebert feel is not appropriate material for a children’s movie. Ebert and Gostin both note that many young viewers will have questions after watching the film and parents must be prepared to answer them. These questions are difficult to respond to because, Ebert Notes, sometimes Bambi, or another film, like The Lion King may “represent [the child’s] first exposure to the existence of death.” While Ebert supports younger children seeing The Lion King, he does not believe Bambi is a good experience for younger children. He argues in his 1988 review following a theatrical re-release that it is more difficult for these children to discern fiction from reality and that Bambi paints a picture of “sexism, nihilism, and despair, portraying absentee fathers and passive mothers in a world of death and violence.” Critic Dave Kehr, on the other hand, writing at the same time as Ebert, counters that kids in the 80s deserved to see Bambi, just as their parents or grandparents did in 1942. A product of its wartime era, Bambi has “a more vivid sense of evil” but, he says, “let those who say that such things don’t belong in a ‘children’s film’ be condemned to live forever in the saccharine world of the Care Bears.” Disney does not sugar coat reality or deny the horrors some children experience. In agreement with Kehr’s argument, Cox et al suggest that the “non-threatening references to death” found in fairy tales and films like Bambi make them “appropriate for use with children” when helping them understand what death

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56 Nicki Gostin, review of Bambi, directed by David Hand, Walt Disney Pictures, Newsweek, March 7, 2005.
58 Dave Kehr, review of Bambi, directed by David Hand, Walt Disney Pictures, Chicago Tribune, July 15, 1988.
means.⁵⁹ In fact, Cox et al’s conclusions found that Disney films like Bambi “can serve as effective learning tools for children.”⁶⁰

Multiple reviewers further question Disney’s representation of reality in Bambi’s art style. Though Mary Stevens of the Chicago Tribune 1989 and a 1941 review in Variety praise the technical and artistic excellence of the film, other film writers harshly criticize Bambi for being too realistic for a cartoon. Disney had a very specific style in mind for the film and forbade human-looking gestures typical of animals like Mickey Mouse seen in previous cartoons.⁶¹ He instead wanted life-like depictions of the deer and other forest creatures rather than the anthropomorphized caricatures characteristic of his previous works. Upon release, many film reviewers were harshly critical of this new style. What many viewers today see as a beautiful artistic masterpiece, art professor and film critic Manny Farber called “bogus art” that is “grotesque” and “vulgar.”⁶² An unnamed reviewer for The New York Times in 1942 wondered why cartoons should exist at all if they were going to become so realistic. “One cannot combine naturalism with cartoon fantasy.”⁶³ This move towards realism and away from fantasy, Farber argues, eliminates the “magic element.”⁶⁴ But Dave Kehr argues that this is the very thing that makes animation great. Writing about Bambi’s transition from childhood to adulthood via tragedy, he notes that “only the animated cartoon can capture this process of change with such force and conviction. A strangely timeless medium,…cartoons exist in their own dimension.”⁶⁵

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⁵⁹ Cox et al, 270.
⁶⁰ Cox et al, 278.
⁶¹ Cartmill.
⁶² Manny Farber, Farber on Film: The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber, ed. Robert Polito (New York: Library of America, 2009), 17.
⁶⁴ Farber, 16.
⁶⁵ Kehr.
Animal movement, not human-like movement, is the main mode of emotional expression in *Bambi*. Many remember Bambi as he tries to walk or cross the frozen pond, spindly legs wobbling about. What Farber calls unpleasant, Kehr sees as a perfect metaphor for the film’s narrative. Bambi, the fawn who falls down more than he stands due to inexperience, must learn to stand up and face life to save himself and the ones he cares about.

**The Lion King**

Following *Bambi* and the success of Disney’s golden era, the studio turned their focus on low budget short films and propaganda. Funds were scarce as the United States entered World War II in December, 1941. After the war ended, the company released *Cinderella* in 1950, thus launching an era of success once more. Disney produced classics like *Peter Pan*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, taking audiences to fantastical fairytale realms like Neverland and Wonderland. Critic Roger Ebert notes that, though successful, these films “drifted off into the neverland of innocuous ‘children’s movies,’ which were harmless but not very exciting.”

The success did not last, however, coming to an end with the death of Walt Disney in December, 1966. The company struggled to get back on its feet as the company changed hands and the movie making climate moved away from family films in the 70s and early 80s. After almost twenty-two years of box office flops, Disney again struck gold with the release of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, ushering in the Disney Renaissance. Disney hired award winning lyricist/composer duo Howard Ashman and Alan Menken as the studio returned to music driven fairytales, paying homage to successful classics like *Cinderella* and *Snow White*. The company had not produced a fairytale since *Sleeping Beauty* was released in 1959. The films following

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67 “Disney History”
Mermaid were “once again,” writes Ebert, “true ‘family films,’ in that they entertain adults as well as children.”

Following the critical and box office triumphs of Mermaid, Beauty and the Beast (1991), and Aladdin (1992), at the height of the renaissance, Disney released The Lion King June 15, 1994. Though somewhat secondary to the studio’s next big princess movie, Pocahontas, The Lion King was met with unexpected success. Directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff and featuring music by Elton John, Tim Rice, and Hans Zimmer, The Lion King was the first Disney animated film not directly based on an existing story. The film’s monetary success is outstanding, even after twenty years. With an estimated budget of $45 million, since its release The Lion King has gone on to become the highest grossing hand drawn animated film to date. Even with a limited release in its opening weekend, the film brought in an average of $793,377 per theater, the highest ever achieved. After a successful first release in 1994, The Lion King was re-released in 2002 and again in 3D in 2011. Including all three releases, the film has grossed $422,783,777 domestically and $987,483,777 worldwide. In addition to its three releases and monetary triumph, The Lion King’s lasting impact and success can be seen in its two Academy Awards, 28 other wins, and 26 nominations, as well as its many offshoots. The Lion King debuted on Broadway in 1997 and has since passed The Phantom of the Opera as the all-

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68 Ebert, “Lion King.”
70 Ebert, “Lion King.”
73 “Lion King (1994)”
time highest grossing show and continues to run today, 19 years later.\textsuperscript{74} The original film also spawned two additional straight-to-video movies, a sequel, \textit{The Lion King II: Simba’s Pride} (1998), and a prequel of sorts, \textit{The Lion King I½} (2004), and two television shows, “The Lion King’s Timon and Pumbaa” (1995-1999) and “The Lion Guard: Return of the Roar” (2016-).\textsuperscript{75}

Looking back on the film’s success, it is interesting to note the many critics who warned parents of the film’s darker side. Beyond the lively tunes like the catchy “I Just Can’t Wait to be King,” the most memorable part of \textit{The Lion King} is the death of Mufasa, the main character Simba’s father. “‘Get up, Dad,’” write Mayer and Pickett, “is not only one of Disney’s most instantly recognizable bits of dialog, but it was also a bold maneuver. [With it] Disney taught a generation of kids about death and mortality and the responsibilities that the living have to the dead they once loved. It’s affecting, troubling stuff even by Disney’s standards.” They go on to say that “not since Bambi’s mother was gunned down has a Disney movie so starkly stared mortality in the face.”\textsuperscript{76} Indeed, the film is much more intense than its predecessors. “The central theme is a grim one: A little cub is dispossessed, and feels responsible for the death of its father.”\textsuperscript{77} \textit{The Lion King} tells the tale of Simba’s birth, childhood, and struggle to find his place in the “great circle of life.” And, as is the harsh reality of nature, that circle includes death.

The circle of life theme is overly apparent throughout the film. It opens with the iconic dramatic sunrise and swelling music as all the animals of the savanna come together in peace and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} “The Lion King Steals the Phantom of the Opera’s Crown as Broadway’s All-Time Highest Grossing Show,” \textit{Daily Mail}, April 9, 2012, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2127401/The-Lion-King-steals-crown-Broadways-time-highest-grossing-Phantom-Opera.html
\item \textsuperscript{76} Mayer and Pickett.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Ebert, “Lion King.”
\end{itemize}
harmony to celebrate the birth of their future king. All is well as smiling parents, Mufasa and Sarabi, look down with pride at their infant son, Simba. But if anyone is listening to the opening lyrics, finding one’s “place on the path unwinding” involves a journey through despair as well as faith, hope, and love. Following the celebration, the film flashes forward to an excited Simba tugging enthusiastically on his father’s ear in attempts to wake him in the early hours of the morning. His father had promised to show him the kingdom, and indeed he does, in addition to imparting an important lesson about being king. Mufasa hints at the fact that he will not always be around, explaining, “A king’s time as ruler rises and falls like the sun. One day, Simba, the sun will set on my time here and will rise with you as the new king.” His true meaning seems to fall on somewhat deaf ears. All Simba gets out of it is excitement at his future kingship. “All this will be mine?” he exclaims. Mufasa goes on to explain the “delicate balance” of nature and the importance, as king, to respect all the creatures in the kingdom, even those that end up as lion food, because they are “all connected in the great circle of life.” This lesson is what Ebert gets at when he says that throughout The Lion King “the filmmakers perform a balancing act between the fantasy of their story and the reality of the jungle.” It is not all peace and harmony in the wild like the opening scene made it seem. Simba, still a young, innocent child, has much to learn. Life is not all fun and games full of pouncing practice with his dad.

Simba’s childish naivety eventually gets him and his friend, Nala, into trouble. During their tour of the kingdom, Mufasa warns his son to stay away from the shadowy place beyond their borders. This, of course, piques Simba’s interest, especially when his scheming uncle, Scar, “accidentally” reveals it to be an elephant graveyard. Simba, fancying himself to be a brave, strong lion like his dad, convinces Nala to go exploring where his father specifically told him not

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78 Ebert, “Lion King.”
to go. After an ego-boosting musical number, the two young cubs arrive at the graveyard, which turns out to be as spooky as it sounds. The bright, sunny color palette of the Pride Lands is quickly replaced by shadowy grays, blues, and reds. Thick, swirling fog and towering bones replace the green grasses and trees characteristic of all the scenes so far. The enormous scale of the decaying carcasses makes the young lions, and the audience, feel very small and vulnerable. Not long after they arrive the cubs and their escort, Zazu, are met by three menacing, yet chillingly comedic hyenas who want to eat Simba and Nala for dinner. After a tense and frightening chase through the graveyard, full of quick cuts and sharp angles, Mufasa finally comes to the rescue.

Mufasa sternly scolds Simba and the four return home. As the sun continues to set, Mufasa sends Nala and Zazu ahead so he can “teach [his] son a lesson.” Here Simba continues to be put in his place. As he moves closer to his dad, he steps in a large paw print, making it clear how small he is. Like Simba’s pitiful roar compared to his dad’s, his little paw doesn’t even fill a fraction of the crater. His prideful attitude in “I Just Can’t Wait to be King” is all but extinguished as Mufasa regretfully expresses his disappointment in Simba’s actions. Fighting back tears, Simba explains that he was “just trying to be brave” like his father. Mufasa points out that bravery does not mean Simba should go looking for trouble and that even kings get scared. The scene’s solemn tone does not last long, as Simba and Mufasa return to joking and playful romping. Partway through their play, however, Simba tries to confirm that he and his dad will always be pals and that they will always be together. Mufasa does not explicitly answer his son’s questions, but instead turns to the stars, explaining that the great kings of the past will always be up in the heavens, looking down to guide Simba whenever he feels alone. Here again, Mufasa foreshadows his own death.
Not long after, Mufasa must rescue Simba again, but this time there are fatal consequences. Scar, Simba’s nasty uncle, desperate to seize the throne, again lures the young prince into a deadly trap. He leads Simba down into a gorge to wait for a supposed surprise from his father, Mufasa. As Scar leaves Simba alone on a boulder, ominous music begins to play, bringing a sense of unease. The shot pans to an enormous herd of wildebeests who are eventually spooked into a stampede by Scar’s henchmen hyenas, the same three from the graveyard. The musical score grows even more threatening when Simba watches in horror as the herd begins to fill the gorge. The scale shifts again, as it did in the graveyard scene, to make the audience feel as small and as helpless as Simba. We see the wildebeests tumble down the steep slope in a cloud of dust from Simba’s vantage point far below. A reverse shot and quick zoom from long shot to close up reveals Simba’s terror. Though frozen at first, Simba quickly scrambles over the uneven rock to get out of the way of the stampede and eventually manages to climb up a small tree branch. Meanwhile Scar fakes concern, warning Mufasa of Simba’s danger. With fear in his face, Mufasa rushes to his son’s aid. Dodging through the wildebeests trying not to get trampled, he catches Simba as the little lion is thrown from the tree. Mufasa manages to get Simba to safety on a ledge but the herd quickly pulls him away, to Simba’s horror. Simba desperately searches for any sign of his father through the smoke and rushing herd. Seconds feel like hours and hope is raised as Mufasa leaps from the stampede once more. The great king struggles up the steep cliff, begging for Scar’s help. Claws bared, Scar reaches for his brother with a sneer. “Long live the king,” he says mockingly before he throws Mufasa from the rocky edge. We watch helplessly with Simba as Mufasa falls, yelling, into the stampeding herd.

As the last wildebeests exit, we follow Simba through the dust, searching for his dad, hoping against hope that all will be somehow well. We hear the echoes as Simba calls out
helplessly. As the dust settles, we see Mufasa lying motionless under the same tree Simba clung to earlier. Simba slowly makes his way to the body and attempts to wake him up, tugging on his ear like the early morning scene at the beginning of the film. Realizing his father is not going to awaken, young Simba cries out for help, tears streaming down his face. He eventually cuddles under Mufasa’s lifeless paw, seeking protection from the only source he knows. To literally add insult to injury, Scar turns up, blaming Simba for the whole tragedy. “The King is dead,” he says to Simba’s horror, “and if it weren’t for you he’d still be alive.” A close up of young Simba’s face shows his reaction and his processing of this information, similar to Bambi’s reaction when he learns of his mother’s death. Scar goes a step further adding, “What would your mother think.” As the world Simba knows crumbles around him, Scar tells him to “run away and never return.” Simba, still trusting his uncle, heeds his advice and runs off. Moments later, the three hyenas appear out of the dust and Scar tells them to kill Simba. Another frightening chase scene ensues as Simba scrambles to escape from Scar’s bloodthirsty minions.

The death’s depiction here is explicit and acknowledged. The audience sees Mufasa’s body and there is confirmation that he is actually dead. Simba cannot wake him and Scar explicitly says, “The King is dead.” Unlike the events following the death of Bambi’s mother, *The Lion King* depicts the grief process in the events following Simba’s escape. He is threatened with his own death if he ever returns to the place that was once his home and future kingdom. The young lion’s entire life is turned upside down in a matter of minutes and he must deal with these events, which are on the verge of unbearable, especially for a child. In a mood lightening shift of tone as well as color, comedic duo Timone and Pumbaa find Simba alone and visibly

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79 *The Lion King*, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (Walt Disney Pictures, 1994), DVD (2011).
depressed in the middle of the desert. In an attempt to help him cope, they instruct the young cub in the ways of “hakuna matata,” no worries. Timone explains that sometimes “bad things happen and you can’t do anything about it,” so Simba should “put [his] past behind [him]” and “turn [his] back on the world.” Though he eventually grows up in this care-free paradise with his pals, attempting to ignore the events of his past, he is still reminded of it and the lessons his father taught him. His friends even laugh at him when he tries to explain what Mufasa once said about the stars.

Luckily for the Pride Lands, now in bleak ruin at the hands of Scar, Simba cannot hide from his past forever. He must come to terms with his father’s death and resulting guilt and take his place as rightful king, finding his true place in the circle of life. An old friend, a wise, old baboon, and Mufasa himself finally bring Simba to his senses, in what critic Kenneth Turan describes as a “Serengeti therapy session.”\(^{80}\) Instead of running from his past, he must learn from it. As critic Owen Gleiberman writes, “Even after he has become a physically mature lion, Simba remains a youth inside. He has to will himself to face his enemies, to replace his father in the circle of life.”\(^{81}\) The spirit of his father urges Simba to remember who he is, the son of the king and rightful ruler of the Pride Lands. Mufasa lives on in Simba. The finality of Mufasa’s death is lessened in his return as a spirit. Cox, Garrett, and Graham categorize this kind of death status as reversible-altered form.\(^{82}\) Rather than the traditional model of grief that emphasizes disengagement and separation from the deceased, Mufasa’s return follows the contemporary model of grief, emphasizing the importance of continued bonds with lost loved ones. To a child,


\(^{82}\) Cox et al., 273.
the film demonstrates how “a dead parent can serve as a source of comfort, a guide, and a part of the child’s emerging identity.” Though change and acceptance is difficult, and responsibility is much harder than hakuna matata, Simba eventually returns to Pride Rock, learns the truth about Mufasa’s death, and avenges his father, taking his place as king. As prosperity returns to the Pride Lands once Scar is defeated and the hyenas are chased away, new life replaces the death of the past. As the film closes, we see a new life, Simba’s child, and the great circle of life continues to turn.

With these scenes and themes in mind, it is clear to see why many critics warned parents of The Lion King’s intensity. Indeed, The Lion King is not “the mindless romp with cute animals” as depicted in its advertisements. In addition to being more mature in theme, the film is arguably the “darkest and most intense” of the Disney collection, seeming for many to be “more appropriate for grown-ups than for kids.” Of the eleven critical responses analyzed in the present study, three specifically called into question the film’s G rating and four more indicated that it might not be suitable for younger audience members. On the other hand, two writers suggested it a good film for encouraging conversations with young children about darker themes. The remaining reviews mentioned the death, but did not make a recommendation one way or the other.

“Mufasa’s disturbing on-screen death,” writes Janet Maslin of the New York Times, “raises questions about whether this film really warranted a G rating.” She further backs up this

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83 Sedney, 319.
84 Ebert, “Lion King.”
argument, mentioning Simba’s harsh banishment and “violent fight at the end of the story.”

Peter Stack of the *San Francisco Gate* indicates agreement with Maslin when he notes suspicion at the film’s rating despite its “journey…into death, despair, exile and revenge.” The important thing to note here is that these reviews brush the surface of a deeper discussion on the reputability of the rating system in general, a topic that holds much potential for future scholarly evaluation.

According to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the rating system was set up in 1968 to give parents the “tools to decide what movies are suitable for their children to watch.” It exists as a sort of proxy for parents between children and potentially inappropriate media. A film for general audiences, rated G, should contain “nothing that would offend parents for viewing by children” whereas a PG rated film, parental guidance suggested, “may contain some material parents might not like for their young children.” With these official definitions in mind, it seems obvious that *The Lion King*’s rating would be more accurate if it were rated PG rather than G. Even the supporters of allowing young ones to watch the film suggest that it is important to follow up and discuss what was just seen. But the question is asked again as to where the line is drawn between what is and is not considered appropriate for children.

Increasing in our modern society, “many children [are] exposed daily to movie promos chock-full of shooting and explosions, to video games in which characters rip out each other’s hearts and to real-life scenes of murder and mayhem on the evening news…The real world is much

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89 “Film Ratings.”
worse for kids than the movie world.”\textsuperscript{90} It seems the jury is still out on this subject, especially where the MPAA ratings are concerned.

Like any subjective analysis based on personal tastes and opinions, the MPAA ratings are not a perfect system and a comparison of ratings over the years reveals inconsistencies. According to \textit{Forbes}, a G rating was standard for animated features in the 1980s and 90s. Studios would fight to obtain a general rating at all costs to ensure maximum box office turnout, “evidenced by the box office failure of the PG-rated \textit{The Black Cauldron}.”\textsuperscript{91} Disney, and other studios, pushed the limits during the renaissance as to what was considered G. In addition to \textit{The Lion King}, Claude Frollo sings about lust and murder in \textit{The Hunchback of Notre Dame} and major characters are shot or hung in \textit{Tarzan}. Since the 90s, however, the ratings on animated films have been much stricter. Where a stabbing was acceptable in G-rated \textit{Beauty and the Beast}, the same type of violence left \textit{Tangled} (2010) with a PG rating. “In just over ten years,” writes Scott Mendelson, “we’ve gone from animated and/or family films being rated PG for having kid-sized heroes killing henchmen in battle (\textit{The Incredibles}) to animated films getting PG ratings for the equivalent of a fart joke and a few near-miss escapes.”\textsuperscript{92}

Despite the inconsistencies in the MPAA system, it remains interesting to note what has been considered appropriate for general audiences since the release of the first full-length animated feature, \textit{Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs}, in 1937. Like its Grimm fairytale counterpart, \textit{Snow White} has plenty of unsettling content – the evil queen threatens to have Snow

\textsuperscript{90} Janine DeFao, “Disney’s ‘Lion King’ Rekindles the Violence Debate,” \textit{The Baltimore Sun}, June 27, 1994.
\textsuperscript{92} Mendelson.
White’s heart cut out and later poisons her with an apple and the film’s climax features an epic showdown to the death with flashing lightning all around. “Suffering is nothing new in Disney’s animated films,” says Perri Klass, yet only recently have animated features been given stricter ratings.93 Contrary to what animation studios believed in the 80s and 90s, it is not the G rating alone that guarantees large box office turnout. Instead, I argue that it is the departure from innocence featured in so many Disney films that draws the audiences and brings critical success. *The Lion King*, and films like it, resonates so deeply with audiences because it “deals with real issues.”94 It represents reality: the circle of life is not complete in this universe without death. Like life, the film has its emotional ups and downs. “The movie itself is simultaneously grand and intimate, serious and silly, heartbreaking and heartwarming,” making it a true Disney classic.95

Though intensely depicting harsh realities of life, *The Lion King* “treats its ostensibly young audience with a respect and esteem that few family-centric filmmakers typically do…where another film might simply let that [tragedy] sit on its own, *The Lion King* is about where Simba goes from there, how it shapes the course of the rest of his life.”96 The film packs enormous life lessons and rich themes into a mere 90 minutes, presenting opportunities for audiences of all ages to learn in a non-threatening way. “The messages in fairy tales, nursery rhymes and Disney movies present subjects that are important for parents and teachers to discuss with children,” says child development specialist Gloria Hirsch.97 Many children “do not have

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94 Ebert, “Lion King.”  
96 Mayer and Pickett.  
97 DeFao.
very developed or accurate concepts of death” and are “often unprepared to deal with the death of a loved one or even of a beloved cartoon character.”98 By watching films that show death and the process of grieving and talking about them with adults, children can absorb information about death and learn coping skills for handling grief. “Children will have the chance to have expanded coping skills if adults expose them to films in which positive and useful models of grief are offered,” argues Sedney.99 The cultural context in which a child grows up provides them with ideas about “what death means and what grieving will be like.”100 Children and adults can easily identify with characters like Simba as he struggles to overcome the death of his father. The filmmakers did not sugar coat the reality of Simba’s loss or glaze over it. The death of Simba’s father is instead at the very heart of the narrative, its driving force. The creative team behind the film understood that “if children’s entertainment is purged of the powerful, we risk homogenization, predictability and boredom, and we deprive children of any real understanding of the cathartic and emotional potentials of narrative.”101 An assertion explored in both Bambi and The Lion King, as well as in almost every Disney film, “cute little cartoon characters are not sufficient to manufacture dreams,” Ebert writes. “There have to be dark corners, frightening moments, and ancient archetypes like the crime of regicide.”102

As mentioned before, narratives are deeply rooted in human culture. The stories of the past influence ones told now and will continue to inspire stories told years from now. Most Disney films are directly based on, or are heavily influenced by, fairytales and other famous works. Ebert mentions regicide, a theme common in many stories, notably those like

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98 Cox et al, 267.
99 Sedney, 322.
100 Sedney, 322.
101 Klass.
102 Ebert, “Lion King.”
Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. Killing the king, or perhaps killing the father, pushes the central protagonist forward. In order to reach maturity, the character must break away from his parents and take his own place. Of course this theme sounds familiar. The narratives in *Bambi*, *The Lion King*, and *Big Hero 6* feature a hero’s journey to reach maturity and the struggles they must face to do so. In the case of all three films, a parental figure must be sacrificed to effect change within the character. Though perhaps (and hopefully) not as dramatically, separation from one’s guardians is a transition every adolescent must eventually experience.

**Big Hero 6**

The Disney company continued its reign after *The Lion King* with more successful titles like *Mulan* and *Tarzan* released in 1998 and 1999. The studio soon lost its footing in the wake of a dramatic shift in animation technology brought by the success of the first feature length computer animated film, *Toy Story*, produced by Pixar Animation Studios in 1995. As studios like Pixar and Dreamworks Animation and computer generated imagery began to rise, Disney struggled to find its place amidst the fast changing technology and new competition. The post renaissance period between 1999 and 2007 is sometimes referred to as the experimental era because the studio produced a wide range of films, with strikingly different styles and themes.\(^\text{103}\)

In terms of success, there were dramatic shifts between popular films like *Lilo and Stitch* (2002), the studio’s first truly successful film since *Tarzan*, and flops like *Dinosaur*, Disney’s first attempt at computer animation in 2000, or *Home on the Range* (2004). None of the films of the early 2000s, however, matched the triumphs of the renaissance and many are often overlooked or forgotten. In 2002, Disney began downsizing, laying off their animators and

closing studios, with plans to follow the other big studios, abandoning traditional hand-drawing and moving to all computer-animated films. The Burbank, California, 2D studio closed in 2002 after Home on the Range was completed and the Florida studio followed in 2004. The studio continued to struggle following the switch to CGI with the release of their first computer animated film, Chicken Little, in 2005.

Things began looking up once more for Disney Animation with the purchase of Pixar in January, 2006, and the naming of John Lasseter as chief creative officer for both studios. Compared to Walt Disney himself, many hoped Lasseter’s creative genius and charisma could “rekindle the spirit of Disney’s famous animation” and “reclaim the studio’s golden era.” He was, after all, the first filmmaker to run the studio after Disney’s death. Shortly after taking over Disney Animation, Lasseter and Edwin Catmull, president of the combined studios, set up a “story trust,” similar to Pixar’s “brain trust,” in which directors and story editors come together, even ones not specifically working on a film, and critique the film in hopes of fostering more collaboration and creativity among team members and creating better movies. Lasseter must have done something right because this new story-telling approach, beginning with Bolt in 2007, has brought audiences films like Tangled and Wreck-It Ralph in 2010 and 2012, all of which have been much more successful both critically and at the box office. Frozen, released in 2013, has been perhaps the crowning glory of modern Disney Animation. With a budget of $150

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105 Friedman.
million, the film has grossed $1.3 billion worldwide, making it the all time highest grossing animated film.\textsuperscript{107}

Though this wildly popular hit has its fair share of Disney tragedy (Anna and Elsa are orphaned after their parents die in a shipwreck), for the purposes of this research, I will instead focus on the studio’s next release, \textit{Big Hero 6}, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams. Riding the tidal wave of success created by \textit{Frozen}, \textit{Big Hero 6}, based on a relatively unknown Marvel comic of the same name, was released in the United States a year later in November 2014. Though not as big a triumph as \textit{Frozen}, the film brought another financial gain for Disney, earning more than $657 million at the box office worldwide compared to its $165 million budget, which was $15 million more than \textit{Frozen}’s.\textsuperscript{108} Outside of the box office, the film won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature and another 13 awards in addition to 52 other nominations.

In addition to being the first Disney animated feature based on a comic book, \textit{Big Hero 6} strays from Disney’s beaten path in other ways as well. Rated PG, the movie features a darker tone and is aimed towards older audience members. With no cute animals or catchy songs, it is clear that this is not a “once-upon-a-time kiddie kingdom” story, says Manohla Dargis of the \textit{New York Times}.\textsuperscript{109} Betsy Sharkey of the \textit{Los Angeles Times} notes that is “a little edgier, its


humor a little grittier and its sensibility very 21st century, setting it on a different path than the studio’s classic fairy tale staples.”¹¹⁰ *Big Hero 6*, however, does not quite make it to the level of viciousness characteristic of the live action Marvel films like *Iron Man* or *The Avengers.* Surprisingly for a more action-oriented movie, it even takes a stance against violence. Nevertheless, critics like David Hiltbrand of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* wonder if the film should have earned an even higher rating: “The villain is scary, and the chase and battle scenes are decidedly vivid, particularly for a PG film.” But, he adds, “Maybe our children have become so inured to violence that they don’t get nightmares anymore.”¹¹¹ Indeed, the subject of violent entertainment and its influence on consumers, especially children, is a hot issue of debate and the focus of much recent research. The focus of this paper, however is meaningful death rather than sensational.

*Big Hero 6* also features a more diverse cast of characters and a blending of cultures. The film is set in San Fransokyo, a near future mix of San Francisco and Tokyo. Gorgeously rendered in a realistic and colorful style that would have Manny Farber vomiting, this combination of American and Japanese styles may also have Walt Disney “[flipping] in his cryogenic chamber,” but it brings a uniqueness and beauty to the film.¹¹² And, notes Japanese reviewer Kaori Shoji, “*Big Hero 6* gets Japan…For perhaps the first time in Hollywood history, the Japanese depicted here are not wearing glasses, they’re not short limbed and they don’t have an accent.”¹¹³ Roy

¹¹⁰ Betsy Sharkey, review of *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, Walt Disney Pictures, *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 2014.
¹¹¹ David Hiltbrand, review of *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, Walt Disney Pictures, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 8, 2014.
¹¹² Hiltbrand.
Conli, the film’s producer, wanted to avoid the criticism Disney has often gotten for twisting a culture to suit a film, such as the misrepresentation of Chinese culture with the Siamese cats in *Lady in the Tramp* or the misogyny in *Mulan*. The creative team did not want “the Japanese effect,” but instead wanted a nod to Japan, its environment, and a cross between the gentle spirit of Hayao Miyazaki’s works and the dynamic action of anime films. The *Big Hero 6* team also wanted to showcase Japan’s love of technology. In Western cultures, especially in recent cinema, robots and technology are often depicted in a negative light. The media loves to stir up the fear that artificial intelligence will someday take over the world and that technology is ruining our lives. Take *The Matrix* or the social media horror movie *Unfriended*, for example. “But in Eastern cultures,” notes Conli, “robots are helpmates and for Hiro, Baymax is a surrogate father figure and best friend.” Indeed, Baymax the robot’s gentle charm keeps the feature, and protagonist Hiro Hamada, grounded.

*Big Hero 6*’s plot features the classic hero’s journey, as many films do. The feature opens with orphaned 14-year-old high school graduate Hiro gambling, entering a robot he created in shady bot fights. Like Simba, the boy could use some humbling. When the match turns sour, his older brother and role model, Tadashi, comes to the rescue. Tadashi, concerned that Hiro is wasting his talent and putting himself in danger, tries to convince his brother to join the San Fransokyo Institute of Technology, where Tadashi and his friends go to school. A tour of the “nerd lab,” a chat with a famous professor, and a demonstration of Baymax, Tadashi’s pet project, finally gets Hiro to change his mind. Hiro works with Tadashi to get ready for the student showcase at the university through which Hiro hopes to gain acceptance into the robotics

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114 Shoji.
115 Shoji.
program. The presentation is a hit and all seems well for Hiro and his brother: “I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you,” Hiro says to Tadashi. “Thanks for not giving up on me.”

As the two share a touching brotherly moment, “adhering to a Disney tradition as old as Snow White and as recent as Frozen,” says Time reviewer Richard Corliss, disaster strikes. The building they left moments before bursts into flames. As people flee the fire, Tadashi rushes in to help his professor, despite Hiro’s pleas against it. Hiro turns to follow but a massive explosion knocks him to the ground. We see a close-up of Tadashi’s baseball hat and hear sirens in the distance as Hiro calls his brother’s name. The sirens get louder as the screen fades to white then black. We next see a memorial and funeral montage and find out that Tadashi perished in the explosion. As family and friends gather at Hiro’s aunt’s house, we see Hiro alone in the dark upstairs. Like Bambi, we do not witness Tadashi’s death. Unlike Bambi, we are shown Hiro’s response and grief process. As life moves on around him, Hiro continues to grieve, keeping to himself in his darkened room, not eating, never leaving, and not going to class. He ignores a video call from his friends and throws away his college acceptance letter. The mood begins to lighten when an accidental injury awakens Baymax, Tadashi’s healthcare companion robot. In an attempt to help, Baymax only seems to make things worse. In the process, Hiro stumbles upon one of his microbots, which he originally assumed were destroyed in the fire. The bot leads Hiro and Baymax to a secret lab where Hiro finds somebody has stolen his bots and is making more, launching the rest of the plot.

When Hiro and Baymax return from the lab, Baymax finds Tadashi’s hat and asks where he is. “He’s dead, Baymax,” Hiro says, but Baymax does not understand. “He should have lived

a long life.” Hiro explains that he is gone because of the fire. Baymax tires to explain that “Tadashi is here,” but Hiro cuts him off saying, “People keep saying he’s not really gone as long as we remember him…still hurts…” It is clear that Hiro is still struggling with his brother’s death. Baymax tries to help, downloading a database on loss, after Hiro explains that the hurt he is feeling is not physical like Baymax is used to treating. Baymax acts as Hiro’s continued connection to Tadashi, again conforming to the contemporary model of grief. Tadashi is gone, but Hiro does not forget him.

Hiro eventually discovers that the fire was probably an attempt to cover the thief’s tracks, so he enlists the help of Tadashi’s friends to bring the masked villain to justice. Upon confronting the thief, we find out that it is Professor Callahan, the man Tadashi was trying to save, which angers Hiro even more. He tries to take revenge, removing Baymax’s healing chip so that he will kill Callahan. Luckily his friends stop Baymax but Callahan escapes. Later Baymax confronts Hiro about the purpose Tadashi created him for, caring for the sick and injured, when Hiro again tries to remove the healing chip. He shows Hiro the video log Tadashi created while making Baymax. We watch with Hiro as Tadashi makes improvements to Baymax’s design and his joy when the robot finally functions properly. “Just wait till my brother sees you,” he says. “You’re gonna help so many people.” Hiro realizes his mistake in trying to seek revenge and decides to follow in his brother’s noble footsteps. “My brother wanted to help a lot of people,” he later says, “and that’s what we’re going to do.”

The ending makes it all too clear that the team of super smart heroes have a shining career ahead of them, and probably a few more movies, a fact that had many critics groaning. Almost all of the thirteen reviews read for this study bemoan the oversaturation of superhero
films in Hollywood and the “dreaded origin story” *Big Hero 6* presents. Kyle Smith of the *New York Post* sees the film as simply a marketing ploy, writing that “you can practically see the hot breath of the marketing guy condensed on the neck of the screenwriter… *Big Hero 6* is marred by slow development, bland characterizations, limp jokes and meaningless action scenes thrown in at random.” Adam Grahm of *The Detroit News* follows a similar thread, noting that *Big Hero 6* “falters as a superhero movie…[It] doesn’t need to turn into a loud, cluttered action film, but that’s where the story goes…[An] inconsistent script builds to an overly busy, standard action movie climax that detracts from the simple story about a boy and his cuddly robot pal.” The reviewers find that *Big Hero 6* lacks the originality to make it stand out among the myriad of superhero films audiences have been exposed to recently. Kyle Smith worries that it acts as simply a money maker for Disney, preying on all the superhero hype and the recent success of *Frozen*. Interestingly though, the critics never say that *Big Hero 6* is all bad or hopeless. The emotional complexities the story presents are what ground the film. However, it struggles to follow through. The story has much potential for powerful emotional depth comparable to Pixar tear-jerkers like *Toy Story 3* or *Up*, but, note critics like Bruce Kirkland, the emotional strength gets “bogged down” by generic characters and plot development.

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117 Susan Wloszczyna, review of *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, Walt Disney Pictures, Rogerebert.com, November 7, 2014. Wloszczyna notes that in 2014, twenty-four new superhero titles were set for production in the following six years.


120 Bruce Kirkland, review of *Big Hero 6*, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, Walt Disney Pictures, *Toronto Sun*, November 6, 2014.
Entertainment Weekly writes that the screenwriters “[seem] to want to surgically implant the plush heart of a Pixar movie into the lumbering mechanical body of a Marvel property.”

The reviewers, and audiences, are drawn to the way in which Big Hero 6 handles tragedy and the relationship it creates between Hero and Baymax. Both Adam Graham and Richard Corliss point to the cuddly robot as the “most real thing in the movie.” Even Hiro’s big brother Tadashi seems a little too perfect to be a well rounded and relatable character. Big Hero 6 presents the classic hero’s journey in which Tadashi acts as a parental figure and mentor for the wayward teen orphan in need of some humbling. When Tadashi is tragically killed, the impact of his death drives all of Hiro’s decisions and subsequent actions throughout the remainder of the film and potentially for the rest of his life. Tadashi’s death also sends Hiro into a fit of depression. It is not only the death of a character the audience has grown to love and admire but also how Hiro deals with the reality of his brother’s death that brings the real emotional complexity and power. We also find that the masked villain’s rage stems from the grief he feels because of his daughter’s disappearance after a scientific experiment goes awry. The film is “poignant and sophisticated on the emotional side,” says Kirkland. “It deals with tragedy” and “boldly explores the effect of clinical depression.” Big Hero 6 is praised by many, including Peter Travers of Rolling Stone, for “showing respect for the grief Hiro is feeling.” Unlike the almost complete absence of grief in Bambi, “Hiro’s sadness over his brother’s passing isn’t just

121 Keith Staskiewcz, review of Big Hero 6, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, Walt Disney Pictures, Entertainment Weekly, November 14, 2014.
122 Graham.
123 Kirkland.
124 Peter Travers, review of Big Hero 6, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, Walt Disney Pictures, Rolling Stone, November 7, 2014.
treated as a one-and-done origin story—it infuses every decision and emotional junction in the film,” says Staskiewcz.125

Like Bambi and Simba, however, Hiro is not left to deal with his grief alone. In addition to caring friends (whom he usually ignores), he has Baymax, Tadashi’s lovable, care-giving invention and the resounding favorite character among critics. “He’s irrepressible and irresistible,” says Sharkey. Dargis adds that through his “toddles, waddles, [and] squeaks,” he “represents technological optimism at its shiniest and most reassuring.” Kirkland also notes that “Baymax is instantly likeable, especially for children…The character is also powerful in communicating his peaceful, tender nature.”126 The gentle robot with a big heart takes care of Hiro and reminds him that Tadashi and his work are not gone and that Hiro should not avenge his death. The scenes featuring the puffy robot with only a barbell for a face are the most enjoyable because of their humor and sincerity. We, like the reviewers, are drawn to Baymax and these scenes of emotional sincerity but long for more than the film ends up providing. “It’s a shame,” says Variety writer Peter Debruge, “the filmmakers felt obliged to resort to a testosterone-fueled battle with a less-than-special villain,” after such a solid first half.127 Debruge, later in his review, goes on to praise the strong emotional core present in the short film, Feast, that precedes the main feature. It depicts the birth and death of a human relationship from the perspective of a man’s dog. Audiences “can’t help choking up,” Debruge says. He wonders if “perhaps it’s fair to ask more of the feature that follows,” since director Patrick Osborne can pack so much feeling into six short minutes.128

125 Staskiewcz.
126 Kirkland.
127 Peter Debruge, review of Big Hero 6, directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams, Walt Disney Pictures, Variety, October 23, 2014.
128 Debruge.
Schultz and Huet, in their study, argue that death in American film is “distorted into a sensational stream of violent attacks by males, with fear, injury, further aggression, and the absence of normal grief reactions as the most common responses.”129 They go on to argue that “paring humor with death-related behaviors and conversations…distort psychological reactions to death.”130 Big Hero 6 may have its share of male attacks, fear, injury, and aggression, but it does feature a realistic representation of grief and depression among its sci-fi action. Tadashi’s heroic death by explosion may be what they refer to as sensational, but viewers are not going to see Big Hero 6 because they get excited about violence. There are a lot of factors that draw viewers to a film. Much of their enjoyment of Disney films like Big Hero 6, however, comes from the film’s depth of emotional complexity. Why else would reviewers cling to the tender moments among the typical superhero action in Big Hero 6? When it comes to Disney, audiences seek and have come to expect a film that feels “real.” Schultz and Huet suggest that film preference may reflect different attitudes and feelings about death. Indeed, Disney animated films are written with a much different audience in mind than films like The Godfather (1972) or Reservoir Dogs (1992).

Limitations and Future Research

All research has limitations, and this study is not an exception. One major limitation was a lack of existing research specific to the relationship between death and film popularity and success. As others have said while studying death in Disney films, hopefully in the future more attention will be paid to children’s cinema, the prevalence of themes like death, and the enormous popularity they amass. The present study was also limited to strictly Disney animated films.

129 Schultz and Huet, 137.
130 Schultz and Huet, 147.
films and only focused on three. A vast majority of Disney films, both live action and animated, feature death as a prominent theme and it would be worthwhile to investigate the larger collection of Disney films and those from other studios.

Since the discussion surrounding death and film success is limited, there are many potential avenues of future research and analysis. This research was primarily based on qualitative sources and would benefit from a more quantitative analysis. Since the present study was focused primarily on critical responses, future research could delve more into how children react to these films and how this lines up with or challenges assumptions critics make about children and the suggestions they give parents about who should and should not see the films. The study could also be expanded to include other animation studios, like Pixar or Dreamworks. Do these studios focus on death as much as Disney? It would also be interesting to investigate the changes made when turning a book into a film, such as why the Bambi creative team made the choices they did to tame down the original story. A closer and more focused look could be taken on the representation of death in film and its relationship with its historical and cultural context. Since its humble beginnings, the Disney franchise has become a powerful force within our culture and will continue to be for years to come. Its unique position as both a molder and reinforcer of values and ideals can be used in positive ways to inspire hope and change within the hearts and minds of children and their families.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was an exploration of the topic of death within Disney animated films and why these films are so successful despite their dark themes. Death has been and continues to be one of the most common topics in film, including those intended for children and families. Though Walt Disney is often thought of as an artist keen on creating a better world
within his films, why does the Disney reality still include mortality? Why does Hercules sacrifice his immortal life with his family and the rest of the gods, his primary goal in the film, to be with Megara in the end? The simple answer (besides the power of love) could be that to die is to be human. The full human experience includes eventual death. Americans, however, often avoid the subject of death, especially with children. In American society, childhood is often idealized as being care and threat-free, even though the reality is that it often is not. As children grow up, they face many challenges, like moving to a new place and meeting new friends. Transitional periods in life bring their own challenges as well. Some children face more troubling issues like chronic or terminal illnesses. Others have difficult lives at home, dealing with abusive or absent parents. Adults often try to shelter children as long as they can from the difficulties of life. Films like the ones discussed in this study, however, can be used in positive ways to help children understand and deal with troubling times, whether it be fitting in at a new school or coping with the loss of a loved one. Rather than a carefree escape from reality, these films can be used as educational tools.

Both narrative and the struggle with our mortality are deeply rooted in human culture. From an early age, we use stories and story telling to make sense of the world around us and to come to terms with life experiences. People enjoy movies that defy their expectations and that they can connect to on a deeper emotional level. When it comes to movies for children, adults expect, based on idealized thoughts about childhood, to be met with something surface level and safe, which is sometimes the case for children’s films. But with others, like Bambi, The Lion King, or Big Hero 6, these assumptions are proved incorrect as the narrative departs from the safety of innocence. Even films for children can be powerful and resonate with their audiences on an emotional level. We react positively to those that do. The critics reviewing Big
*Hero 6* wished the film would have followed through emotionally. Rather than escape, these films offer audiences a certain level of control, giving them the freedom to explore less common topics like death and mortality. As mentioned before, they also provide a means of communication between parents and their children about difficult subjects. Used as a learning tool, films like *Big Hero 6* or *Bambi* can help children cope with loss and mourning and learn more about what it means to die. Disney movies are not simply reflections of reality however. They also help shape ideas and ways of thinking about life around us. Happy ever afters are not simple clichés. They remind us that there is always a glimmer of hope amidst dark times, and that death can be overcome.
Selected Bibliography


