

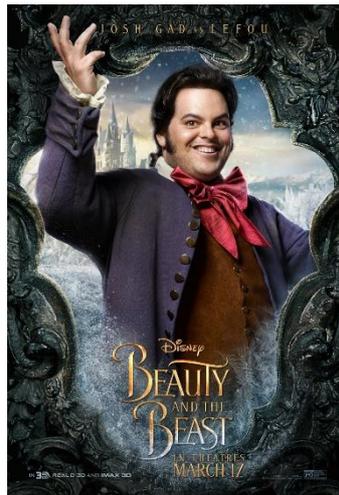
Global Critical Thinking: Disney villains and the habit of making them gay.

The Disney Corporation has long since become a household name producing over 119 films with more in the works since its creation in 1923. Providing entertainment for people of all ages, with their memorable stories, catchy songs, and iconic characters.

In recent years there has been a greater emphasis placed on Disney to diversify their casts and story lines. A task that Disney has slowly been undertaking with the release of films such as *'the Princess and the Frog'* (released in 2010), *'Moana'* (2016) and in more recent years with films such as *'Encanto'* (2021). Despite the progress that Disney has made to become more inclusive in their films, there is still an area that Disney refuses to give any meaningful content for: the LGBTQ+ community.

Throughout the 98-year run Disney has had eight openly and identifiably gay characters - all of which gained a lot of media attention, the most well-known of these would be LeFou played by Josh Gad in the 2017 remake of *Beauty and the Beast*. Speculation had surrounded the character since the original film's release in 1992, with people

wondering about the relationship between the more effeminate LeFou and the masculine Gaston.



This relationship is an example of the queer stereotype known as "the second in command". This is a trope where a hypermasculine man is paired up with a weaker looking man who hangs on every word from the stronger more stereotypical male and serves

as a vessel for the audience to do the same.

The way that LeFou is presented is an example of Disney practicing what is known as "queer coding" a character. Queer coding is a technique used when a writer cannot make a character be explicitly queer. Instead, they use stereotypes to convey the idea of a character's sexuality or gender identity. A common way of presenting men as gay is to make them more effeminate such as with Scar from *the Lion King* and Hades from *Hercules*. The opposite is normally done when women are coded, they are often shown rejecting what is considered classic femininity instead of embracing more masculine traits, such as with Ursula from *the Little Mermaid* whose design is based on the drag queen Devine.



A notable trend with Disney's queer coded characters is that they are all villains. The LGBTQ+ community has raised issue with this being their main form of representation in Disney productions.

Films and in particular, Disney, have long since been an important aspect for the LGBTQ+ community with many queer people relating to the desire to belong. This is because the stories that Disney tells are often about the need to fit in and be accepted, which while this isn't a feeling that is exclusive to the community, it is still a predominate feeling within most LGBTQ+ people.

Due to Disney's popularity the company has a disproportionate role compared to other movie and media organisations in terms of playing a significant part of shaping a child's view on the world. The princesses are beautiful, good and kind, as a result they achieve their "goal" and a marry a prince. The villains are ugly, bad and cruel, they are shown as being flamboyant and often have big ostentatious musical numbers, they are also outcasts and social rejects.

The depiction of the archetypal Disney villain is very relatable for a queer audience – particularly for those who have experienced the feelings of rejection from family, social circles and wider society. That is not to say that members of the LGBTQ+ have not connected with the

challenges and struggles of the Disney protagonists, many trans or nonbinary people relate to the character of Mulan from Disney's *Mulan* (1998) and her struggle to conceal her identity and find her true self, an act that transgender people can relate to.

Mulan aside, this is not a recent approach by Disney. It is possible to trace a negative representation of queer characters through the Disney timeline - characters such as Jaffar from Disney's *Aladdin* (1992), Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* (1953) and even the Evil Queen from *Snow White* (1933) all have elements of queer coding within them. This has the negative impact on the viewers who watch the films, especially younger audience members who see the way that a Disney villain acts (whether it be their flamboyant nature or their speech patterns) subsequently reflected in real queer people. Without appropriate guidance, those viewers associate those mannerisms with something that is portrayed as being bad and untrustworthy.

This brings us to the question as to why Disney queer codes its villains. The answer to that question could be as simple as the fact that when Disney was making its first feature length film *Snow White* the film industry didn't have the same production rating system that it does today. Instead, the Hays Code was

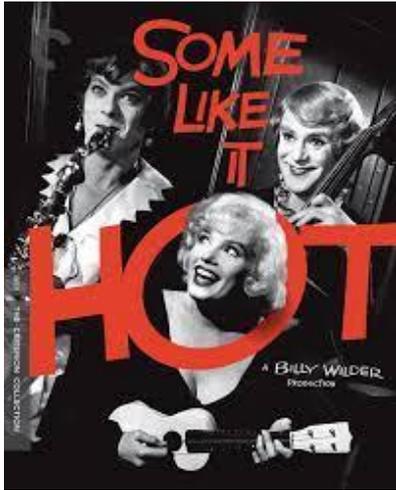
used. Named after William H Hays, the production code was created in 1930 and lasted until 1960 stipulated that for a film to be played in cinemas the film had to conform the rules laid out within it. There are three main rules that make up the Hays Code those rules are:

- 1) That bad or villainous characters can never be portrayed in a sympathetic manner;
- 2) The world must be presented in a realistic fashion;
- 3) Anyone seen breaking the law on screen must be punished for it.

One of the crimes that the Hays Code calls out explicitly as something punishable, was sexual deviancy – which in 1930s America was widely considered as shorthand for being queer. The Hays Code led a lot of filmmakers to place greater emphasis and focus on their villains – often making them bigger characters with loud personalities to contrast with the plainer more reserved nature of the protagonist.

Despite the strict nature of the Hays Code not all directors and film producers followed it. The most well-known example of this was Billy Wilder's film *Some like it Hot* released in 1959.

This film was shocking for American audiences and broke the Hays Code through the use of multiple characters drinking during the time of



prohibition, onscreen violence, heavily implied sexual conduct and the main plot point of two men spending the majority of the film in drag. These are just a few of the ways that the film broke the Hays Code, yet still managed to be shown in cinemas.

Given the reach and influence of Disney, the question of why they felt so bound to the Hays code is puzzling. One theory could be that Disney was not one of the 'Big Five' studios, nor could it rely on the popularity of the actors performing, such as Marilyn Monroe and Jack Lemmon in 'Some Like It Hot', to retain audiences. As the company grew and its films became more and more popular Disney looked at the formula that made its villains so popular and just kept copying it with no regard as to how it would make the LGBTQ+ community look or feel. At the time being any form of queer was seen as a punishable, sometimes criminal offence. There is also the social compliance argument that Disney did not want to

compromise the potential earnings of its film by having openly queer characters portrayed in a positive way. They may have feared ostracising a growing and affluent American middle class, who were not prepared to accept an openly gay character. Disney, arguably, made this a financial decision, rather than one of social justice.

In modern times people have argued that as Disney has evolved and become more inclusive towards the LGBTQ+ community by openly supporting the community online during pride month, like when on 2021 they tweeted this.



The post was met with disbelief and anger from members of the LGBTQ+ community who expressed

doubt as to Disney's genuineness of the post, due to their treatment of the community outside of Pride. Criticisms also came from Alex Hirsch an employee at Disney who's most well-known for the creation of the show *Gravity Falls* that ran from 2012 – 2016, who in response to Disney's tweet had this to say.

Members of the LGBTQ+ community are still dissatisfied with how Disney treats them and finds Disney hypocritical. Disney caused controversy again in 2022 pride month. With the rise of Disney+, the company thought that it would be a good idea to group all of their LGBTQ+ shows together for people to watch. This decision was met with criticism when people saw what shows had been selected within this category. The inclusion of the 2012 show '*Gravity Falls*', was particularly objected to by 'Queer' viewers as its creator Alex Hirsch has said on numerous occasions that Disney pushed back against his resolve to include LGBTQ+ characters, often asking him to either cut the characters out, change one of them to a man/woman or to portray their relationships as a joke.

An example of this in the season 2 episode '*Love God*'. The titular character, a cherub with the ability to make two people fall in love, demonstrated this power in one key scene, where he was initially going to make two

women fall in love. Disney however made Hirsch change the couple from two women to a man and a woman. Saying that it was more appropriate this way for younger views. We can infer from this that homosexuality is perceived by Disney as immoral or improper in some way and not fit for consumption by young viewers; these implicit biases impact the end user and their experiences of media and the representations therein. Further pushing Queerness into the realm of 'Other'.

The debate about Disney commitment to supporting

the LGBTQ+ community continues. In March 2022 Disney was identified as supporting Republican politicians who were pushing a "don't say gay" bill to be passed in the US State of Florida – home to Walt Disney World. This bill prevents teachers from talking about sexual relationships or gender identity in a classroom setting. The Corporation's position resulted in a number of Disney staff waking out in protest. Although stung by wider criticism Disney was initially resistant to changing its position. However, other larger corporations – notably Coca-Cola and Major League

Baseball – came out in opposition to the bill. This emboldened Disney to subsequently reverse its position. Could this suggest public opinion is turning?

Despite ultimately opposing the "don't say gay" bill for many in the LGBTQ+ community Disney's initial position reaffirmed views on Disney's reluctance to treat the community equally. Whether the change of heart results in a longer-term change in Disney's representation of queer characters in its movies remains to be seen.