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Symbolic Interactionism in Beauty and the Beast

Symbolic Interactionism is a communication theory that states society and individuals are created based upon the interactions between each other. Symbolic Interactionism is also described as, “ongoing use of language and gestures in anticipation of how the other will react,” (Griffin 54). Symbolic Interactionism is one of my favorite theories within communication because it is a theory I feel that I have related to the most throughout my studies in communication. One of my favorite movies, Disney’s Beauty and the Beast, does a great job of providing examples of symbolic interactionism. Anyone and everyone can relate the symbolic interactionism theory to their own lives. Shakespeare wrote, “All the world’s a stage and all the men and women merely players,” (As You Like It, Act II Scene 7). I am going to discuss symbolic interactionism and how Beauty and the Beast is a perfect example of the theory.

Professor George Mead from the University of Chicago taught philosophy and was a social constructionist. It was Professor Mead who came up with the concepts within symbolic interactionism but never put the actual theory down in print. It was a Herbert Blumer who was an advocate of Mead which devised the actual theory of symbolic interactionism. There are three core principles of symbolic interactionism: *meaning*, *language*, and *thinking*. “These premises lead to conclusions about the creation of a person’s self and socialization into the larger society,” (A First Look at Communication Theory, Griffin 55). Griffin also states that, “words we use have default assumptions,” (A First Look at Communication Theory 57). A great example of a word that we use which has a default assumption is shown within the movie Beauty and the Beast regarding the Beast himself.

The portrayal of the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast* is one of the best examples of symbolic interactionism throughout the movie. The Beast's attitude at the beginning of the movie is primarily mean and scary because he views himself as a monster. Society has made it clear to the Beast that because he looks like a monster that he must act like one as well. People showed the Beast that they were afraid of him because he was turned into a monster and gave him the sense that he must act the way they think he will act because he looks the way he does. If society did not view "beasts" and "monsters" as mean and scary creatures then the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast* may not have acted the way he did at the beginning of the movie. Then again, he may have still acted mean because of his "looking-glass self". Even if society within the *Beauty and Beast* did not treat him like he was scary in the first place, he may have thought that because he "looks" scary that society will think he is scary so he must act the part, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One of my favorite scenes in the movie which shows symbolic interactionism is after Belle decides to be imprisoned by the Beast to take her father's place. Belle is shown to her new room where she will live. The Beast asks Belle to have dinner with him in hopes that he can make her fall in love with him in order to remove the curse in which makes him a "beast". After the Beast asks Belle to dinner she declines. Belle sits in her room protesting going to the dining room to have dinner with the Beast because she doesn't want to eat dinner with a "monster" who has imprisoned her. The Beast has a mirror which can see things such as what other people are doing at the time. As the Beast looks into his mirror he witnesses the dresser (who can talk) trying to persuade Belle into going to eat with him. Belle tells the dresser that she wants nothing to do with the Beast. After the Beast witnesses Belle saying this, he puts down his mirror and states, "I'm just fooling myself. She will never see me as anything but a monster. It's hopeless."

This shows that he thinks that because he looks and acts the way he does that Belle will never change her perception of him, “the monster”. The Beast’s “me” is created because of the image which is seen in the looking glass of other’s people’s reactions towards him since he became “the beast”.

There are many other portrayals and instances of symbolic interactionism throughout the entire movie. Another example is of Belle’s father, Maurice, who is an inventor. Society views him as “crazy” and “different” because he doesn’t follow the norm. Maurice is always busy inventing “different” things instead of working a normal job. Because he is different from the norm people call him “Crazy Old Maurice”. Society has created the thought that if you are different then you may be “crazy”. Society views Belle as “strange” as well because she likes to read and isn’t into “getting the guy”. At the beginning of the movie they call her peculiar and make fun of her for keeping her head in the books and for not belonging to any crowd. In the song “Little Town/Belle” there is a line that says, “it’s a pity and a sin, she doesn’t quite fit in, cause she really is a funny girl....that Belle.” Belle and her father do not fit the social expectations that have been created for the movie so they actually don’t quite fit in with the town’s society. Could this be because they have kept to themselves in their cottage away from the town? Belle is a bit like her father, different from the rest, because her “me” was formed from being around her father all of the time. Griffin states, “...there is no “me” at birth. The “me” is formed only through continual symbolic interaction—first with family, next with playmates, then in institutions such as schools,” (61). Belle’s “me” was formed because she grew up mostly around her father. She didn’t seem to have playmates so she became much like her father, different from the rest.

Directors of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* were Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise. There are about twelve writers who contributed to the movie as well. I believe that the writers and directors knew about the symbolic interactionism theory because the Beast's character displayed perfect symbolic interactionism throughout the movie. In the beginning of the movie the dialogue in the opening scene describes how Beast was transformed into a beast. It notes that he was a prince who turned away a woman who needed help because she was old and ugly only to find that she was a beautiful enchantress instead. I believe that the Beast turned away the old and ugly woman because he was brought up in a palace, treated like royalty is treated (the very best), and only valued beauty because that is what he is brought up to love and appreciate. This was his "me" at the time until the enchantress changed him into the Beast and then his "me" changed forming into what he believes society thinks of "monsters". During the movie Beast tries to get Belle to fall in love with him despite the fact that he is a hideous creature in hopes to break the curse upon his castle. Once Belle starts to show signs of love and compassion to the Beast it is then that Beast realizes that he doesn't have to be what society thinks of him. He starts to realize that he can be loved, but notice this is only after Belle has showed him interactions which support those feelings. I feel that there are many messages throughout the movie but an underlying message relating to the theory is that you don't have to be just like everyone else and that you don't have to be what society expects of you. Just because you're a "beast" doesn't mean you need to act like one.

Before analyzing symbolic interactionism along with the movie *Beauty and the Beast* I never realized how much of the symbolic interactionism theory along with other communication theories that we experience in everyday things such as movies, television shows, and real life. I believe that as human beings we are all formed first by genetics and then by our communication

with others. Symbolic interactionism is the basis for all other human communication. If you look back to the three principles of the symbolic interactionism theory you will find how symbolic interaction is a basis of all communication. Meaning: we act toward people or things based upon the meanings assigned to them. Language: meaning is brought through language and interaction. Thinking: interpretations are changed by our own thoughts which can be backed by other's thoughts or what we think other's think. We are surrounded by symbolic interactionism. Griffin states that, "without symbolic interaction, humanity as we know it wouldn't exist," (A First Look at Communication Theory 54).

Works Cited

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