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## A Frog of a Different Color

by Lydia Harlan

In the decade of the 1920s, “The Roaring Twenties,” the 19<sup>th</sup>

Amendment was passed in the United States, granting suffrage to women. Also at this time it was beginning to be more common for women to get hired for office jobs and gain more respect, not only in the household but also in the political and work world. Women ultimately began to enjoy a ‘freer’ lifestyle. On the other hand, although this was a time of great advances towards freedom in the United States, it was also a time of tremendous fear and terror. Clans like the KKK re-grouped and inflicted panic and anxiety in the minds of many blacks, Jews, and women living in the United States. Kim Kenney states, “They strove to rid anything ‘un-American,’ and African Americans were the prime suspects.” Keeping in mind these obstacles that African Americans faced during this time period, it is argued that Disney skews the true hardships that African Americans experienced in twentieth century United States. In this paper I argue that Disney has not correctly conveyed the circumstances of 1920 New Orleans by not capitalizing on the prejudice that happened during this time period, having all African American musicians and creating interracial relationships. With the creation of *Princess and the Frog* Disney does a respectable job producing the first African American princess, yet they manage to completely bypass the conditions and stereotypes that come with an African American heroine in New Orleans during the 1920s.

At first glance, the image of Tiana may seem to give into the typical princess stereotypes: thin, beautiful, and big eyes. However, even though she contains all the physical characteristics that define a princess, she maintains attributes that separate her from the average white princess standards. Compared to previous princesses like Cinderella and Rose from *Sleeping Beauty*, Tiana’s work effort and saving up of every last penny is what sets her apart from the princess norm. She works for what she wants and all the

materialistic things that are present do not blur her idea of what is important. Analyzing this characteristic, Tiana can be paralleled to President Obama. They both took on a role that has been predominantly white in the past. Obama’s acceptance of a new role in unfamiliar territory goes along the same lines as Tiana’s dream. The criticism that Obama got for being the first African American president parallels the criticism that Tiana got for trying to fulfill her dream of having her own restaurant. Is there significance behind the long awaited creation a black princess and the election of a black president? Does the color of someone’s skin really have that much of an impact on American society?

We are familiar with the fact that *Princess and the Frog* is the first Disney movie that stars an African American protagonist, yet the movie doesn’t tackle race head on. This is a fairytale with a white prince and a black princess, who for much of the movie isn’t a black princess at all. Disney doesn’t necessarily emphasize, or even mention the color of Tiana’s skin, which is surprising considering the time period and the setting that the movie takes place in. The only time we witness prejudice in *Princess and the Frog* is the scene when the real estate agents tell her that, even if she is able to afford her dream of having a restaurant, a female of her ‘background’ won’t be able to maintain it. This is the only instance in the movie where Tiana’s skin color becomes a factor on her journey for happiness. Along with the racial misrepresentation in *Princess and the Frog*, the depiction of musical expression is portrayed in a light that doesn’t follow the reality of twentieth century America.

There are multiple situations in the movie that portray African American’s lifestyles inaccurately compared to the way that it was in the “Roaring Twenties” of New Orleans. The *Princess and the Frog* paints a picture of a time period that is all music and dancing, all the time. The movie shows African Americans as the only people performing jazz, but in reality, black musicians were not allowed to play in most establishments. CSMonitor.com states, “Whites mocked black musicians, and they weren’t even able to play in front of a white crowd. They had

to play where they could – brothels, speakeasies, and other areas with poor reputations.” Disney skews the depictions of African American consequences in *Princess and the Frog* in inaccurate ways through musical performances, but also through the relationships developed in the movie.

Even though *Princess and the Frog* represents a decade of some sort of normality in interracial marriage, “in the United States prior to a 1967 Supreme Court decision, interracial marriage was banned” (CSMonitor.com). The dispute over the ethnic origin of Naveen is heavily argued by critics. The olive complexion and Brazilian accent lead me to believe that the prince is not black. By creating a prince with the physical characteristics of Naveen, Disney satisfies their need for a traditional white hero, however, they try to blind their audience by making him diverse enough to not be seen as white. This unrealistic image depicted by Disney has skewed what the 1920s social norms and prejudice was truly like. If Disney wanted to get the point across that multicultural marriage happens, and like Mama Odie says, “it don’t matter what you look like,” then the time period and location of the movie shouldn’t have been set in 1920s New Orleans. Now, yes, non-segregated relationships happen, but during the time of the movie people were murdered or lynched for having relationships with someone of a different race.

Another racial relationship issue that rises in *Princess and the Frog* is the friendship between Charlotte and Tiana. Someone of Charlotte’s social and economical status wouldn’t fraternize with an African American, let alone an African American with the economic stability of Tiana. In my opinion, Disney places Tiana in the situation of being Charlotte’s best friend because they want to make the comparison of your typical white princess and the new and improved black princess very visible. Although I understand the reason why Disney would want to enhance the idea of moving away from the original white princess, they did it in all the wrong ways. The illustration of Tiana’s mother as a servant to the rich white family is very realistic, but the chances that the

daughter of the poor, African American servant would befriend the rich, spoiled, white daughter of the wealthy family are slim to none. If a kinship were formed between these two different worlds, then the most common consequence would be lynching.

In conclusion, Disney’s initial idea of creating the first African American princess is tremendously applauded. However, the presentation of time period and setting in *Princess and the Frog* alters the perspective of the viewer analyzing certain actions and consequences depicted in the movie. If Disney really wants to broaden the mind of the viewer today, they should continue moving towards stepping outside of the norm, and not retreating back to what is comfortable for them. When will Disney be brave enough to have a plus size prince or princess? Will they have the courage to have two princes or princesses? If we want to move towards an accepting future we need to stop grouping people into categories with a negative innuendo and stop judging something before we know everything there is to know about it.

In her paper, “A Frog of a different color,” Lydia not only demonstrates her knowledge of the film *The Princess and the Frog* but also makes many insightful comparisons between the film and relevant historical and current cultural tensions. Lydia addresses the topic with a clear voice and strong structure, both of which help to enforce her points. Her paper starts with an intriguing opening sentence which simultaneously grabs the reader’s attention and situates the paper in its historical context. The introduction also contains another critical element for a successful paper, the thesis. Lydia’s thesis is arguable, yet defensible, leaving the opportunity open for her to make her arguments. The way she goes about supporting her points is organized, succinct and ultimately effective. She concludes her essay by asking some critical questions of her audience to keep them thinking, even when her words on the page have ended.

-Melissa Cherry, Writing Center Consultant