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[*How Zootopia Can Inspire Acceptance and Change*]

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Civil Rights movements have made incredible strides in recent years because the issue of racism is being brought to the attention of the public through popular culture. Today, we routinely see advocates for equality, such as the Black Lives Matter campaign. The campaign, which is aimed at eliminating racial prejudices and racially-motivated violence, was a response to George Zimmerman's acquittal for the murder of a black teenager, Trayvon Martin. The murder and subsequent acquittal outraged many minorities, and they responded with the Black Lives Matter movement in order to shed light on the racism and injustices minorities still face.

Movements such as this one can have a dominant voice when being broadcasted to the nation, therefore increasing the chances of effecting change. All of these issues make it clear that racism and prejudice are some of the most pressing matters in our country that must be addressed. By approaching these difficult issues in a lighthearted manner, the Disney movie *Zootopia* aims to tackle racism in an innovative way. The film depicts the dangers of racism in a way that children can understand in the hopes that the younger generation can grow up with an open mind and can potentially end racism.

Zootopia is a new Disney movie centered on what happens when predators and prey live together. The film, released in 2015, was an instant success, achieving the highest grossing opening weekend in Disney history. It earned a whopping \$73.7 million on opening weekend in the United States (Schwerdtfeger). The movie focuses on a young bunny named Judy Hopps, who is determined to become a police officer. Along the way, she makes an unlikely alliance with a fox, a member of the predator family, named Nick Wilde. The plot develops when a few predators become violent and disrupt the harmony for which the fictional city of Zootopia was known, resulting in harsh

discrimination towards the entire predator population. A sense of “us” versus “them” ensues, reflecting the problems of race within our own society.

The film illustrates how even a seemingly perfect society can be afflicted by prejudices, causing the entire utopian system to crumble. Nick’s character most prominently displays the dangers of racism and how stereotypes can have a deep impact on a person’s life. With children as the primary audience, the hope is that they can learn about the harm that happens when a society begins to fixate on biological differences.

Disney perfectly captures the issue of racism through Nick Wilde’s character development. At first he is depicted as a cunning, sneaky, and deceptive fox that goes along with many stereotypes of the animal. Even in a place like Zootopia, where animals are said to live in harmony, Nick still faces discrimination enacted by everyone he meets. For example, you can see in figure 1 that when Judy first sees Nick, she is extremely suspicious of his actions and even goes so far as to lunge for her fox repellent spray in order to protect herself. She makes a judgment that Nick is untrustworthy based solely



Figure 1: Judy reaching for fox repellent spray

on the fact that he is a fox, which directly parallels to the discrimination against African Americans and other minorities in our society. As a police officer, Judy is supposed to protect everyone equally under the law regardless of their species. She takes her job very seriously, but her initial gut reactions toward Nick show that even the most open-minded people are still plagued with prejudices that are deeply rooted in their subconscious minds. Therein lies the problem in society. The way to conquer racism is not to confront the conscious awareness of people's minds, but to rewrite the unconscious prejudices as well. *Zootopia* takes on this difficult task in order to introduce a more effective remedy to the problems of racism in our world.

During an emotional flashback scene, the audience learns how the discrimination Nick has faced throughout his life has been so powerful that it has even shaped the way he views himself. The scene shows how Nick was bullied as a child because he was a predator, and how he came to realize that there is no point in trying to be anything else. It reveals a vicious cycle of how racism can be a self-fulfilling prophecy for minority groups when they do not feel they can ever break free from their stereotypes and thus begin to play into those expectations. Scenes like this drive home the point that *Zootopia* has the intention of inspiring the youth of our nation to want to change the unfairness caused by prejudice. Dr. Allison Briscoe-Smith, a professor of psychology at the University of Berkeley, addresses *Zootopia*'s attempt to open the minds of children at a young age in order to conquer racism: "The idea here isn't to make kids feel guilty, but rather to help them put themselves in another person's shoes and begin to identify behavior that they might want to change." By taking this approach, the movie is able to make children feel empathy and use the idea of fairness in order to logically understand that it is not right to treat someone differently based on their appearance or ancestry.

The problem of prejudice has always been a prominent social issue in society because people tend to grow up with these ideas hardwired in their primitive brains. *Zootopia* tries to reverse this evolutionary mechanism by allowing children to see Nick as a dynamic character, not just as a stereotypical fox. By looking into Nick's past, the audience can see why he acts the way he does and how harmful stereotypical mindsets can be to a person's wellbeing. As blogger Zach Blumenfeld argues in his article praising the social commentary of *Zootopia*, "prejudice can have the effect of creating an unbridgeable gap between groups." It is clear that no society can succeed when there are underlying prejudices that prevent equality from flourishing.

The notion of the separation between groups is at the root of many problems in our society, and it is perfectly represented in *Zootopia* when some predators turn "savage" as they begin to inexplicably attack prey in an out-of-control manner. In one of the most important scenes in the movie, Judy publicly claims that the predators could be "reverting back to their primitive ways," as seen in the press conference scene (figure 2). Her warning sends the population of prey into a blind panic because their ingrained



Figure 2: Press conference scene

distrust of predators based on the biological history of predators hunting prey is seemingly confirmed. What is being shown here is that when people are confronted with fear, they let their prejudices turn into outright racism. An example of this in the movie is when the front desk employee at the police department is removed from his post simply because he is a cheetah. Denying the cheetah from continuing with his job at the front desk is unquestionably directed at the racism in our society that prevents minorities from getting jobs because of the color of their skin.

The consequences of Judy's declaration are especially devastating for Nick, who once again faces prejudice because he is a predator. He is visibly hurt by Judy's implications, and their friendship is subsequently harmed. Here, *Zootopia* uses another emotional tactic to appeal to children in order for them to understand how harmful it is to treat someone differently based on stereotypes. Nick is reminded of why he does not try to convince anyone that he is anything more than a sly fox because there are long-existing stereotypes in the prey community that assume predators cannot be trusted no matter what (Johnson).

Zootopia takes a radical approach toward tackling racism by relying on reception from children in order to affect change in the future. The public sphere has been greatly impacted by this movie because it has allowed the conversation of racism to be opened to children. By dealing with the issue head on, the movie shows that children are capable of realizing how others should be treated, regardless of race. When encouraging a dialogue of anti-racism with children, there is enormous potential to help put the problem to rest.

The impact of the film can be summarized by stating that it is a fun, family-friendly way to present some of the most complex problems in the world in a way that is

digestible for children (Antrum). It is the push that most parents and school teachers need to begin addressing a real-world problem with young children. The only way to see a change in the racial problems our society is facing is to change the way we educate the youth. Once the conversation has started, children can begin to shape their views in a less discriminatory manner that they will carry with them throughout their lives.

Zootopia has the potential to be a preemptive strike to abolish racist thoughts altogether. The film offers alternative options for the way children can develop their attitudes toward people of different races. Instead of seeing them as strange, the film encourages them to feel empathy and “treat others as you would want to be treated.” Children will be able to see how hard Nick’s childhood was and how hurt he was by Judy’s proclamation that all predators have the potential to go savage and will want to make sure that none of their friends or classmates ever feel that way. *Zootopia* speaks directly to children in order to stop the rampant problem of racism in the world today.

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