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Research Methods

‘Maybe you can be a hero and still be wrong’: A critical analysis of *Sea Beast*

Intro

Sea Beast, released on Netflix in 2022, is an animated children's movie following young orphan Maisie and the crew of *The Inevitable*, the most feared sea beast-hunting ship. Maisie was orphaned when her parents died working as beast hunters, essentially pirates who hunt down and kill sea beasts. Maisie's most prized possession is a storybook that tells the tales of the hunters, how they live a great life and die a great death. Within this storybook are the tales of the crew from *The Inevitable*, so Maisie sneaks aboard to hunt monsters and make history with her heroes.

It was produced and marketed as a children's movie, but there are heavy subtexts within the film that only the adults following along would notice. The movie reads as an allegory to American history, and through the readings that will be brought up later, it will shed some light on how this is happening and why it is relevant to society. Specifically, we are looking at the question, how does *Sea Beast* work as an allegory for the political climate within the United States? Why is the movie being catered towards children is relevant in the long run? And, how the blurring of the lines between hero and villain can introduce new ways of thinking for children in the future? Media focused towards children has been widely neglected by the academic scene (Johnson), and we are just beginning to scratch the surface and notice the importance of how these films can shape our societal future. "The child's instinct for questioning is essential for real transformation to take place" (Whitley 84). Parents and those scholars

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who are interested in this type of study should focus on children's media, and *Sea Beast* is a good film to start with.

Since 2015, there has been a large uptick in children's movies that are made to be more than just background entertainment, movies like *KPop Demon Hunters*, *Nimona*, and *How to Train Your Dragon*. These movies all follow a similar plot line, with a unique hero who is facing diversity due to their identity and/or their views of the world that are different from the norm. But in the end, beating the odds and becoming accepted into the society they live in, as well as making a change to keep that acceptance running in the future.

It is important to note the relevance of children in an analysis such as this. It is the children who will carry our culture and the world in the future, and the media we feed them will shape how they plan to see the world. Movies are central to worldview shaping within children [Lang]. "Each person's individual identity is shaped by a number of different forces... These forces, in many ways, dictate particular meanings and interpretations of the world around us" (Lang 1). If children are raised on media like the classic Disney princess movies, young girls will grow up wishing for a prince to save them and carry them off to heterosexual marriage. Young boys will grow up wanting to be a hero or a warrior and to fight those who stand in their way. "Films appear to inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for... the public schools, religious institutions, and the family" (Johnson 2). If films have the same or more conviction to children as traditional authority, then the traditions and social issues within the films are more likely to become physical when those children grow up [Whitley].

In the current political climate of the United States, we see a shift back towards conservative ideals, creating rifts between the minorities and those who hold positions of power. Movies like *Sea Beast* have the potential to create future change through the process of worldmaking, and this is because they are being catered to children. Within this essay, I will be dissecting the movie *Sea Beast*, released on Netflix in 2022. We will explore how media presenting diversity in both representation and ways of thinking could introduce the ideas for potential action to shift the current hegemonic worldview and push for change. Through the media framing relevant to *Sea Beast*, of collective memory, feminist and queer theory, we will see how the adventure of Maisie and the crew of *The Inevitable* pushes children to see and accept diverse ideas.

How history Works I will be adding more to this section, specifically about history and collective memory - and how Maisie's book acts as propaganda

The director of *Sea Beast*, Chris Williams, has worked on many groundbreaking children's animated movies such as *Big Hero 6*, *Bolt*, and *Moana*. This was the first movie that he wrote, directed, and produced himself. The reviews on this movie are mostly positive, earning a 94% on Rotten Tomatoes (Gallagher). The animation and soundtrack are highly praised, but reviewers comment on how the storyline is fairly basic, following a pattern seen in many movies, such as *How to Train Your Dragon* and *Luca* (Grateral). Red's, the largest and most feared sea beast, design is also criticized, being called 'uninspired' (Grateral). But it also earns surprised praise for the callouts on history, especially in the American political climate of 2022 (Brown). It is commended for prioritizing the narrative and using a fantasy world to "ask pertinent questions about the stories we believe, and who benefits from them" (Brown).

While this is a children's movie about sea monsters and pirate equivalents, there is a much deeper meaning within the story. It can be argued that *Sea Beast* can be seen as an allegory. But what is an allegory, and what is the allegory that is written into *Sea Beast*? An allegory is an abstract idea within, in this case, a fictional story. We can relate it to the moral within a fable. It is the process of saying something, without literally spelling it out. *Sea Beast* is, on the surface, a story of adventure, acceptance, and heroism. However, deeper down, “[Sea Beast] offers up more complex themes of colonialism, history, legacy, and honor” (Gallagher).

The stress of this allegory lies in the way history works and how the narratives provided shape a culture's history. History is restricted to education; those who learn to read and write are the ones who have the ability to write history. (Rossington & Whitehead). We can see evidence of this in modern American history through the lens of whitewashing. In early-mid America, people of color were much less likely to get a formal education, and so the option of them sharing their history was only possible through oral traditions (Welch). But as time passes, stories get lost, so only those that are written down are the ones that are remembered. In this example of American history, those stories are largely from the high-class, white, educated members of society.

Films always transmit a message within them, even if it is not outwardly noticeable (Lang). “Communication mediums train our consciousness to think in particular ways” (Ott & Mack 15). Even before children are old enough to learn the difference between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, they are being influenced by the media they, or their parents, consume. Films, in particular, bring an audience close to the problems/solutions that they are displaying (Johnson). By immersing the viewer into a make-believe world with visuals, music, and a history that goes along with this

imaginary place, they are able to transport them and quite literally walk them through the change that is about to take place. Especially when focusing on films catered to children, it is important to remember that “Children learn something different from watching the films adults have made for them than adults will take from the same films” (Whitley 77). Looking at *Sea Beast*, children may take away that things that look like monsters aren’t actually that scary or dangerous; and adults may take away that the histories we are presented with may not actually be as true as we assume them to be.

Within this, the films teach values and help viewers find those values for themselves (Ross). “[New readers are] looking to novels for moral and social guidance as well as entertainment” (Ross 55). Films for children are usually put on for entertainment and to distract, but each media comes with its own message that will always be delivered, whether it is the one the author wanted to be portrayed, or one that the audience makes themselves. And within these messages, emotions are also being portrayed. These emotions do not just apply to children; they make it to the adults too: “Nearly all films involving children appear interested, to some degree, in exploring what adults learn from the child’s mode of being and apprehending the world, as well as what children learn from the experience” (Whitley 77). These emotions that are transmitted through films do not just hit children; they make waves across adults as well. They operate as cultural shapers and dictate meaning and interpretations of the world outside of the direct media (Johnson).

The stories that we tell and pass down are what produce the binary stories about ‘heroes’ and ‘villains’ to children. If they grow up believing that they must be fierce conquerors, then that cycle will continue, but if they grow up believing that the right thing

to do is to grow into a person who questions authority and explores new options, then that is the world they will build.

Villains

Pulling this back to *Sea Beast*, the history I am referring to is Maisie's storybook. The book tells tales of how these sea monsters would swim up to shore and 'pluck ladies out of their veggie patches'. These stories that say that the world was dangerous and bleak until the hunters came and started to slay the monsters, and how a hunter's death is the most noble death one can have. In an interview with the *LA Times*, director Chris Williams describes Maisie's story book as "a very powerful tool of propaganda" (Brown). It's a tool for creating a narrative, and more importantly, a history, that benefits those in power.

It has been so long that these stories have been told that they are treated as if they are true. The hunters hold an important role in this fictional society, where the sea monsters attack their ships, and it is up to the hunters to kill them to keep the seas and ports safe. With each monster killed, the captain of the ship will take a souvenir from the slain beast, usually a horn, and bring it back to the King and Queen for payment and proof of the kill.

So, what could the sea beasts represent? This is what is yet to be figured out. Instead of looking at the sea beasts directly, let us look at monsters in children's literature as a whole. Monsters can be seen as representational vehicles for moral lessons, through representing our fears and even our relationships with power (Miller). Think of one of the most popular monsters, Frankenstein. While the monster is looking for his creator, he is met with rage and violence. "Violence against the monster breeds violence" (Miller 387). This is the moral that Frankenstein represents, according to

Miller. Along with morals, monsters can also denote relations with power. Since power has the ability to control events and meanings (Ott & Mack), "Rhetorical critics analyze texts for the ways they encourage audiences to inhabit certain moods, adopt certain attitudes, and undertake certain actions" (Ott & Mack).

What does it mean to be a monster? Frankenstein is green and covered in scars, witches have warts and long noses, vampires are pale and burn in the sun, and sea beasts are giant and do not have the capacity to communicate. In all these instances, the monsters are made to look like something different than the "good" hero, something Other. The people in power who produce and release the media are subtly portraying those who look or sound different as potential monsters and something to be approached as a threat.

However, within media focused towards children, such as *Sea Beast*, monsters are also there to communicate with children, and to show the potential idea that monsters can be harmless, and heroes can be wrong (Miller). Texts like this make the point that "One should never accept abuses of power, but should try to understand their causes and confront them" (Whitley 84). For certain films that counter the hegemonic culture, monsters can be used as a means to open up the imagination of children to see opportunities for change (Whitley).

Scholars who study queer theory are looking at the ways in which media texts "contribute to the ordering of human understanding surrounding gender, sex, and sexuality" (Ott & Mack 229), especially how media can exclude queer voices altogether, turn them into something to be feared, and overall push the heteronormative agenda.

One of the ways this can happen is by characterizing LGBTQ+ individuals as something 'other' than themselves, a deviant choice that they make. Othering is the process of "marginalizing minorities by defining them in the relationship to the (white) majority" (Ott & Mack 167). It follows the hegemonic structure, only recognizing the people who fit into their ideal categories, literally pushing out other perspectives.

The actual monsters in *Sea Beast* are said to be prone to wanton violence; dominant stories about them teach people that they will swim to shore and simply "pluck a lady out of her veggie patch." But the sea beasts have been made out to be these creatures through history books and propaganda, because there is no other representation of them; this is the way they are believed to be. They have been sufficiently 'othered' into a corner of righteous violence where the only way out is death.

Throughout our media history, monsters have always been a metaphorical construct that stands in for a minority group (Benshoff). The most obvious and most widely used is using the monster as a replacement for a queer individual. Like vampires, they could not see a reflection of themselves in media; like zombies, they were there to 'infect' the hegemonic traditional family, and like Frankenstein, they were simply 'made wrong' (Benshoff). In this way, people in the queer community were seen as something 'other' than normal. They were looked upon as deviant and monstrous because of the way they had been portrayed in the media.

While the monsters are depicted as queer individuals, they do not necessarily *have to be*. In *Sea Beast*, we see a wide range of queer characters. Including trans individuals. But these characters are not queer first. They are members of the crew of *The Inevitable*, and they are also queer. In dominant media texts, there is a trend that a

character's identity revolves around their queerness (Babuscio), but this film resists that depiction.

As an allegory, the sea beasts are not sea beasts at all. They are monsters and villains, but they are misunderstood. They have been vilified by those in power. In an article written by *The Young Folks*, "...history can be altered to serve political purposes...". We've seen this before in our own histories. Black Americans were seen as violent criminals, Mexican Americans were seen as drug-pushing gang members, and those in the LGBTQ+ community were seen as a plague. It is only after severe actions and lots of time that these people have gotten rights and have become tolerated. But just because they are tolerated does not mean they are accepted, and it most certainly does not mean that they are no longer at the bottom of society.

Heroes

After Maisie befriends the red blunder, names her Red, and makes another sea beast friend, named Blue, she is able to communicate with Red to have her take them home. On the ride home with Jacob, Maisie, and Blue on Red's back, Jacob takes time to read through Maisie's storybook. He is shocked at the overexaggeration of the stories, pointing out the mistakes. However, Maisie is not listening to him. On Red's back, there are a number of spears and harpoons lodged in her skin, and Maisie is trying to take them out. We see a moment of internal conflict within Jacob, until he, too, begins to help with Maisie's task.

Children have malleable minds; they are more likely to change their opinions. They haven't experienced much of the world, and if they know how to ask questions, then they are able to get new answers. The older you get, the more set in your ways

you are (Ordoña). We see it first in young Maisie, then in Jacob, who seems to be in his late twenties. This is the importance of children's literature like *Sea Beast*, which visually shows a child who becomes a hero, but not in the expected way. With a new idea in kids' minds, that what they are always told might not be true, and if they explore other perspectives, then they too can become a hero.

On their way back to the town, they run into *The Inevitable*, and Captain Crow, previously thinking that Jacob was dead, Crow attacks Red, stuns her, and begins to take her to the capital to kill her in front of the royals himself. Obviously, Maisie protests and ends up locked in the captain's cabin. It is in this room that she goes through books and realizes that all the books about sea beasts have been published through the royal family themselves, every single one of them. It is at this moment that she realizes that everything she ever knew about sea beasts, everything everyone knows, is wrong.

As *The Inevitable* pulls into the harbor with Red being pulled along behind them, they stop directly in front of the palace, where we see the King and Queen waiting. The palace is massive, pure white with shimmering gold accents. The King and Queen have some of the palest skin tones seen in the film, and they are dressed in fine jewels and clothes. They are never seen off the balcony of the palace, creating a heavy disconnect between them and the people of their kingdom. As the ship comes to a halt, Captain Crow steps out onto Red's back, gloating to the King and Queen and preparing for the final kill. Right before he can, Jacob intercedes, not without hesitation, but ultimately, he steps in to stop his father figure from killing the innocent creature. Maisie escapes the cabin and frees Red from her ropes before also stepping up to face the King and Queen, as well as the people who have gathered to watch the spectacle. She gives a

powerful speech, recognizing that she has every right to speak out against this false narrative, showing the people that their history is a lie, and advocating for peace between the sea beasts and humans. The people of the town begin to rally with her, calling to the royals for peace and to hear her out. There is more to this ending, but I will leave that for you to watch yourself.

As the society and technology in this universe of *Sea Beast* grow, the king and queen begin to look for a way out of their partnership with the hunters. The royal family creates a ship called *The Emperor*, which quite literally means commander. The crown believes that the hunters have outlived their relevance and wishes for their own navy to replace them. The hunters strike a deal: both ships leave at the same time, and if *The Inevitable* reaches the red bluster, the largest and most feared sea beast, first, then they continue hunting as they were, but if *The Emperor* reaches it first, the hunters will step down. It is on this journey that Maisie makes her debut as a sailor and a hunter-in-training.

Maisie wants to be a hunter because she wants to be a hero, like her parents, like Captain Crow, and all the other hunters she has heard about who lived a great life and died a great death. She wanted to be the hero in her stories. In *The Inevitable's* first encounter with the red blunder, Maisie and Jacob, Captain Crow's adopted son and next in line to be captain of *The Inevitable*, get taken by the red blunder. But she doesn't eat them; she takes them to an island, uninhabited by people, and a sanctuary for sea beasts. It is here that Maisie and Jacob realize that the sea beasts aren't inherently bad. Most important, they have no desire to randomly eat humans. When they attack ships, they are just protecting themselves.

Feminist theory is the process of looking at media productions with a focus on “exploring the diverse ways that men and women are socially empowered or disempowered” (Ott & Mack). The feminist movement has been around since the 1800s (Pruitt). This movement focuses on creating and maintaining equality between women and men, focusing on things like women’s right to vote, closing the pay gap, and working to put women in positions of power. However, the feminist movement has been criticized for ignoring or minimizing the importance of women of color.

The theory itself includes intersectionality, the idea that social issues are always intersecting with other issues of self-expression and identity (Ott & Mack). Overall, looking at a movie like *Sea Beast* through a feminist lens is looking to point out the different systems within that world’s society that either create or hinder equality between different genders.

Within *Sea Beast*, we see men and women together with no apparent disconnect between the power levels. The first mate on the Inevitable is Sarah Sharpe, famous as the most loyal crewmate there is out there. Sarah Sharpe is both black and disabled, yet she holds up importance nearly as much as the captain himself. She is in this society’s history books as an important figure, and she is one of the idols Maisie holds in such high regard.

The crew of *The Inevitable*, all on its own, is a diverse masterpiece. We see people of all different heritages, sexualities, genders, and bodies. There are trans women and women who do not present in a feminine way. These characters are not looked down upon, and arguably, more importantly, their identities are not ignored. They are recognized as being different, but they are not fed extra hoops to jump through; they

are on the same page, the same team, and at the same level as the cis-heteronormative men that we see running the ship.

Through seeing these queer individuals on screen, children can take the message that you can still be queer and be a hero. Yet, they do not have to do this *because* they are queer; they can do that because of who they are as whole persons, where being queer is an important but not externally defining feature of their identity. While this is empowering, there is also the takeaway that there are still monsters in this world, but the monsters might not be what they are regarded as. It shows that progress is being made, but there is always more to learn. With all of this talk of hero's and villains, who is the real villain in *Sea Beast*? It appears to be the royals, the one's who set the story, and willingly tell it wrong to benefit themselves. This trend is one seen not just in fictional movies, but in our own history.

An Allegory to today's political climate

How does *Sea Beast* act as an allegory to the American political climate when it was released (2022)? Well, films are often an allegory for societal structures and following ideological concerns (Khoirotusyarifah). One of the things we've seen recently is changes in policy, and "changes in the US immigration policy over time tend to reflect the changing images of the alien Other in SF films" (Ott & Mack 291). The 'alien Other' is mostly relevant in science fiction films (Lutgendorf); however, the concept of the Other (Ott & Mack) can be seen across film as a whole. The Other is a group of the audience (of whatever media is being presented) that is actively excluded or portrayed as inferior to the rest of the media public (Ott & Mack). In the instance of the sea beast, it is not quite clear what the beast could represent. Monsters in movies are usually

represented as a marginalized group, immigrants, people of color, people in the LGBTQ+ community, and so on (Miller).

But with the wide diversity in this movie, it is hard to pin down a specific type of person being left out. We see people of color, people with disabilities, and trans people at the forefront of the cast in *Sea Beast*. So perhaps the sea beasts themselves could just be actual beasts of nature. According to Khoirotusyarifah, “If we take care of nature, nature will take care of us” (Khoirotusyarifah 555). In this author’s eyes, the beasts are an allegory for nature, how humans are wrecking the planet, and how by befriending the animals of the world, there is hope that they will take care of us. This leads to the fact that allegories can also be seen as a way to show moral and existential dilemmas (Khoirotusyarifah). “Producers of art create it as a means of dealing with some challenge” (Ott & Mack). In this sense, filmmakers are using their creations as a way to tell a story they believe needs telling.

In the film *Sea Beast*, Maisie (the child protagonist) is attempting to expose a lie about the war between sea beasts and humans that was told as their history. “If there is a history of remembering, there is a politics of forgetting” (Rossington & Whitehead). With this in mind, *Sea Beast* could be a rendition of the director’s ideas of how American history is being handled, how it sanitizes the stories that center around the marginalized Other.

One issue that is the foundation of the feminist movement is pointing out that gender inequality is not about individually sexist people but about a system of power, the patriarchy, within which males are dominant and females are subordinate. Patriarchy is “a system of power relations in which the interests and values of women

are seen as lesser to the interests and values of men” (Ott & Mack). Men are usually the ones who hold the highest positions. In monarchies like the kingdom we see in *Sea Beast*, the king usually has more power than the queen. In democracies like the United States, men are more likely to be president (we have yet to have a woman president), and the first ladies have very minimal power. Women are often seen as accessories to the men in power. And even still, women earn 82 cents to every dollar a man makes in the same position (Kockkar). Patriarchy is not something that is actively challenged publicly anymore, but it is a very real issue we still face.

In the realm of *Sea Beast*, we are met with a king and queen in an elaborate white and gold castle. The king and queen are pale in skin tone, dressed in fine clothes with crowns of gold and shells, a tribute to their seaside kingdom. Looking at a monarchy, it is easy to assume that it is patriarchal; however, in all the scenes, it is the queen who gives the orders. It’s a minor detail, but it adds to the environment of equality we see even within the hunter community the movie is centered on. The reign of power in the movie is still problematic, and it is the reason for the othering we will work through later in this essay, but even the “bad guys” are shown with a new level of equality we don’t see in our own political climate.

The active goal of feminist analysis is to view and then deconstruct popular media to reveal unconscious narrow-mindedness in terms of gender. The narrowmindedness being deconstructed in *Sea Beast*, could be the women in power or the wide range of body types and skin tones seen in the heroes of the film. With the current rise in conservatism we are seeing in our government and representatives, the outside media that we consume is becoming ever more important.

Within *Sea Beast*, the stories that are told are very pointed and catered to benefit the current royal family in power. However, we do not realize this until the end of the movie. We are introduced to the hunters as unquestioned heroes. They are there to kill sea beasts and keep the shores safe from the inherent violence that they bring. In the movie, Maisie's dream is to be a hunter because her parents were, but they died at sea, leaving her an orphan. One of Maisie's only belongings is a book of stories and the history of the hunters. This book includes the stories of the crew of *The Inevitable*, leading her to stow away on their ship and joining their crew. Throughout their adventure, they realize that the sea beasts aren't inherently violent at all. The next realization is that all of the books published about sea beasts were published by the royal family, where the books were making them lots of money.

History is shaped by the memory of the groups who write and share it (Rossington & Whitehead). Depicting the sea beasts as monsters instead of potentially peaceful creatures, the history that was picked to be told was published by those in power. This type of cherry-picking stories to tell runs deep within American history. One of the current debates revolves around the pervasive whiteness of history and the exclusion of minority stories (Welch). Credit was usually given to the white "hegemonic higher class" in a group or partnership, merely representing the minorities as background characters, no matter their contribution. Excluding is the complete erasure or exclusion of a minority group (Ott & Mack). Stories of minority success are usually just not included in the history provided by those in power. Those in power are the "hegemonic ideal" type of person to further push the desire to conform to their standards.

Between these examples, we see how, through picking the success stories of the hunters, they were made out to be heroes who would further benefit the economy. And through excluding stories of peaceful beasts and discouraging further research on them, the sea beast's role is solidified one as a villain.

Conclusion I'm planning on diving more into the book ban thing - hopefully it'll be a nice wrap up for it all

Sea Beast is special in the way that it does not talk down to younger audiences. This movie is a narrative and teaches children to think critically about right and wrong, driving into their minds that 'you can be a hero and still be wrong' (Ordoña). *Sea Beast* was released in 2022, and during this time in America, the government administration was increasing efforts on school book bans. She is critiquing existing histories, but not books. Chris Williams mentioned this being a sort of motivation in his storytelling. He attempted to create an authentic and plausible world, and between reviews, we see that he succeeded. By showing the transformation of a dominant narrative in a fictional world, it can begin to bring ideas to those in this real world. And it pushes people to make a change.

Children's media is an under-researched portion of scholarship (Lang). Films are used to do things such as teach values, share political ideology, present history, and shape a worldview. The relevance of children is directly related to the potential they have later in life. The roles children will play in the societies of the future are directly connected to the roles they see in modern media, such as film.

Overall, *Sea Beast* is a very diverse film. It readily shows characters of different skin tones, body types, and disabilities, and none of these characters are looked down on for these differences. The importance of the representation in this film is not just that it

Commented [2]: [spend more time working on this. On the surface, Maisie is promoting a book ban herself. Right-wingers promoting book-bans argue that reading progressive books is dangerous because it "gives people ideas" contrary to dominant culture that they would not otherwise have (about race, gender, sexuality, etc.), where Maisie seems to be critiquing the way that books also have been used as propaganda supporting dominant culture.]

shows these different things; it's the way the characters interact with them. The differences are acknowledged, but they are not necessarily the person's whole identity. The large and brutish person with a bald head is shown to be a mother; it gives voice to people who are mothers who don't look traditionally feminine. Maisie meets a sea beast, and she is terrified of it. But, upon closer inspection and questioning, she realizes that it isn't dangerous. The people who wrote all of her books telling the story of their violence were shown in a different context than what was most likely to happen. She was able to recognize the difference between what was told to her and what actually is. This is a movie for misfits; people don't act the way they look. The monsters are actually just gentle giants. And most importantly, Maisie takes her lived experiences and comes to her own conclusions.

As children grow, they look for themselves in characters that are shown to them through the media they consume. Through watching *Sea Beast*, a child can see herself as Maisie, and when that child exits the world in the movie, they can continue to take the lessons Maisie taught them into real life. This movie teaches children to acknowledge differences, but not to assume that the person's difference is all they are. They learn to think critically and question the cultural resources that are being fed to them. And most importantly, they are taught to look for an adventure that will help them make a new world.

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