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19 December 2025

Zootopia: Disney's Commentary on Stereotyping and Social Prejudice

A movie about a bunny cop can't be more than harmless entertainment for children, right? Turns out the 2016 Disney animated movie written by Jared Bush, *Zootopia*, also functions as a satire that critiques social prejudice and bias in society. The film is set in the utopian city of Zootopia, a place where all types of mammals are supposed to live together in perfect harmony. Its optimistic protagonist, Judy Hopps, is the first rabbit to become a cop in the Zootopia Police Department. Here she is faced with a mysterious case of missing mammals. As Judy continues her investigation, the audience sees her encounter systemic barriers and widespread prejudice that challenge her belief in justice and hard work. Through the use of caricature to highlight stereotypes, situational irony to subvert expectations and the juxtaposition of Judy's optimism with reality, *Zootopia* criticizes society's denial of prejudice, revealing how deeply ingrained stereotypes are in our culture even when equality is promised.

With its use of animals as its characters, *Zootopia* caricaturizes social stereotypes to emphasize the biases and assumptions that shape human interaction today. The film establishes a society where there is tension between predator and prey species, with predators such as lions, wolves and foxes often being treated suspiciously while prey such as rabbits and sheep are seen as weak or dull. Using the past hunter and hunted dynamic between the predator and prey species as the basis for this tension, the writers of *Zootopia* create an allegory of the current conflicts

between different human groups. This tension is similar to how humans make assumptions about certain groups based on the actions of their ancestors and use it to justify their conflict, only here the stakes are raised higher because predators would eat the prey in the past. Furthermore, this social bias can be justified by the animal's physicality. Predators are often large and possess features such as sharp teeth and claws, adding to their image of being dangerous. This contrasts with a prey's small size, making prey species appear even more vulnerable in comparison. The bias that forms because of these characteristics frequently affects how certain animals are treated, extending into their professional and social roles. Some examples include when Nick, a fox, is refused service at a restaurant intended for large prey (*Zootopia* 00:18:47-00:19:45), when Judy is assigned to meter maid duty (*Zootopia* 00:16:01-00:16:31), and a sheep being the unappreciated and clumsy assistant to the mayor of Zootopia. The incorporation of these stereotypes also often leads to humorous moments, like when Judy was rushing the extremely slow sloths at the DMV (*Zootopia* 00:40:36-00:44:40). Having a lighthearted tone rather than one that is very negative and critical makes the audience more likely to finish the movie and connect with its message. Overall, the use of animals to exaggerate differences in human personality as a basis for prejudice mirrors social bias in our society in a comedic way.

While caricature is used to establish the deep-rooted social bias in this city, the film uses irony to highlight the ridiculousness of these stereotypes. At the start of the movie, the audience sees animals in very stereotypical roles – Judy's rabbit parents being cautious with foxes, a fox bullying Judy when she was young (*Zootopia* 00:04:16-00:05:36), the sheep assistant mayor Bellwether being portrayed as small and meek, and a large polar bear initially assumed to be the largest crime boss in town. Because of these instances, the audience starts expecting animals in those stereotyped roles; however, as the story progresses, these expectations are defied. For

instance, the fox the bullied Judy in her youth was portrayed as a menacing figure but later he admits to being insecure and pursues a career as a baker, which is unexpected for a ruthless predator (*Zootopia* 01:17:44-01:18:32). Moreover, that same fox is hired by Judy's parents, which is ironic because they were always scared of the other predators and constantly warned Judy to be cautious around them. Similarly, assistant mayor Bellwether, is revealed to be the manipulative mastermind behind the missing mammals, contrasting with the expectation of her harmlessness. Even the crime boss, Mr. Big, is revealed to be a tiny mouse (*Zootopia* 00:47:50-00:48:17), demonstrating that the preconceived notions about an individual's abilities based on species are often illogical and inaccurate. Falling into this pattern of stereotypical assumptions also prevents the main characters of our film from discovering the real villain sooner. With their use of ironic role reversals, the film satirizes societal stereotypes, showing how assumptions about people or groups are often absurd and unreliable, rarely capturing the full story of the target.

The juxtaposition of Judy's optimism with the harsh reality of their system is used to further highlight the injustice of social bias. Our main character enters the workforce with the mindset that hard work and determination alone will determine her success, holding firm belief in Zootopia's motto - "anyone can be anything". Instead, she is immediately confronted with a system that undermines her simply because she is a rabbit. Despite graduating at the top of her class, she gets assigned to parking duty and must constantly go above and beyond to prove her competence in the predator filled workforce. This treatment contrasts with that of officers like Clawhauser, a leopard that receives acceptance and respect without demonstrating the same level of dedication or achievement. While he is sitting at the front desk eating donuts and playing with video editing apps, Judy is on the field actively investigating the case, yet his position is rarely

questioned (*Zootopia* 00:53:36-00:54:26). This reality is perfectly encapsulated by Nick's line, "Everyone comes to Zootopia thinking they can be anything they want. Well, you can't. You can only be what you are" (*Zootopia* 00:25:33-00:25:42). Having Judy, the protagonist the audience is rooting for, as the character being discriminated against further amplifies the foolishness of societal bias. By placing Judy's hopeful outlook against these unfair realities, the film highlights the absurdity of a system that claims equality, but rewards individuals based on their identity rather than merit.

Using satirical techniques such as caricature, irony, and juxtaposition, *Zootopia* exposes the underlying prejudice in a society claiming equality. The use of these devices allows the writers to present their message in a humorous way, encouraging the audience to laugh at how ridiculous stereotyping is while also recognizing its presence in our world.

Works Cited

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