

# **Development as Dictated by Society: An Analysis of Disney's *The Fox and the Hound* Through the Lens of Erikson's Developmental Theory**

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In this essay, I will endeavor to prove that Erik Erikson's stages of human behavioral development are clearly illustrated in children's movies, specifically *The Fox and the Hound*, an animated film put out in 1981 by Walt Disney Productions. Further, I will try to show that children's movies provide examples of "correct" responses to the challenges articulated in Erikson's developmental theory, thus teaching children and even adults how to respond to situations in the way society desires. Erik Erikson (1902-1994) was a leading psychologist in the social development of humans. He theorized psychosocial development as taking place in eight stages: hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care, and wisdom. In "Erik Erikson's Stages of Development," Arlene Harder, psychotherapist and editor of the online journal *The Learning Place*, claims that Erikson's basic philosophy was based on the major themes that "the world gets bigger as we go along and failure is cumulative" (Harder, 2002). Harder uses psychoanalysis to focus on relationships and development. Erikson's theory is not the only accepted explanation of development that Harder cites in her article. She also mentions psychotherapist Pamela Levine, who describes development as a "spiraling cycle" (Harder, 2002), in which we pass through developmental milestones and never "visit" (Harder, 2002) them again. This is in stark contrast to Erikson's theory, which posits that most stages of development are necessarily revisited throughout life.

"It is human to have a long childhood," said Erikson. "It is civilized to have an even longer childhood." The developmental stages asserted by Erikson are based on the concept that we as humans innately

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think of ourselves in terms of “opposites” (Harder, 2002). A person can know without having to be taught that they are pessimistic or optimistic, aggressive or passive, adventurous or cautious; however, there are some characteristics of human nature that must be learned “based on the challenges and support we receive in growing up” (Harder, 2002). These traits include concepts such as the perception of self-worth, inferiority or competence, will, and purpose. Erikson felt that the “massive influence of culture” (Harder, 2002) molded these factors in an individual. The developmental theory he built spans from birth to death, covering adulthood as a sort of extended childhood. This theory is supported subconsciously by society in all forms of art. Children’s movies in particular exemplify certain aspects of Erikson’s developmental theory, and in doing so provide examples of the kinds of responses to the challenges of adolescence and adulthood that are accepted—even desired—by contemporary society. In *The Fox and the Hound*, an animated children’s movie about a hound dog (Copper) and a fox (Tod) that become friends as children but grow up to be hunter and prey respectively, two animals take on human characteristics in order to be effective exemplars of “correct” behavior during growth.

The first three stages of development—hope, will, and purpose—are major themes throughout *The Fox and the Hound*, suggesting that the childhood development of trust, autonomy, and initiative (rather than allowing oneself to be mistrustful or succumb to our vulnerabilities) is a vital cultural lesson that continues to resurface throughout child- and adulthood. Tod and Copper meet at a very young age, when they are still learning to trust those that “take care of” them (Walt Disney Productions, 1981). According to Erikson, developing trust in others and “confidence in the future” is necessary in order to prevent feelings of “worthlessness and a mistrust of the world” later in life (Harder, 2002). This idea is highlighted throughout *The Fox and the Hound*, but is especially prevalent in Copper and Tod’s first meeting, where they trust each other without reservations, even after Copper reveals that he has been “tracking” Tod (Walt Disney Productions, 1981). Big Mama, the owl that acts as a sort of grandmother to Tod after his mother’s death, emphasizes the correctness of this first unsuspecting act of trust by remarking, surprised and amused, “Look at that! A fox and a

hound, playing together” (Walt Disney Productions, 1981). Through their budding friendship and unbridled trust in one another, Tod and Copper begin to build autonomy and “[learn] right from wrong” as well as how to “take initiative in creating play situations” (Harder, 2002), three of the most important aspects of Erikson’s second and third stages of development. Tod tells Copper that he “[bets Copper would] be good at playing Hide and Seek” (Walt Disney Productions, 1981), and proceeds to teach him how to play the game. This “play situation” (Harder, 2002) shows the subconscious initiative of the two to play out their predetermined roles of hunter and prey in a tame “trial universe” (Harder, 2002), and is also the start of their friendship that eventually leads to Copper beginning to question his identity and role later on in adolescence. At this point, Copper and Tod are also beginning to learn what is considered right and wrong in their society, as Copper gets in trouble with his master for staying in the woods and playing with a fox, while at the same time Big Mama tells Tod that “if [he] keeps on hanging around with that hound [he’ll] end up hanging on the wall” (Walt Disney Production, 1981).

Competence, devotion, and affiliation or love—the next three stages of Erikson’s developmental theory—surface in the main conflict of *The Fox and the Hound* in order to highlight the societal importance of developing a sense of one’s role in adolescence and early adulthood, the time of greatest change in a person’s life. *The Fox and the Hound* initially suggests that following their predetermined roles is the correct course of action by fast-forwarding a few years to reveal that Tod and Copper no longer associate with one another; however, as the movie continues it becomes clear that it is advocating a more disruptive conception of right and wrong. Copper is shown asking Chief, a much older hound, to “scuffle” (Walt Disney Production, 1981), an action that evokes scenes of him and Tod playing when they were young. Tod later visits Copper, and the question of the correctness of their roles comes to the forefront. Tod asks Copper if “[they’re] still friends” (Walt Disney Productions, 1981), and Copper—though visibly excited to see his former friend—responds that “those days are over” because he is “a hunting dog now” (Walt Disney Productions, 1981), revealing the importance of having a role—whether correct or incorrect—in

society. Copper's questioning of his role is shown through his lack of complete devotion to it and his avoidance of the consequences of being a "hound dog." He allows his old friend, Tod, to escape "this one time" (Walt Disney Productions, 1981) after he discovers him, showing that he is competent in his role but not quite content with it. Tod's role as merely the prey of a hunter is less demanding, and thus his conflict lies more with finding intimacy and a "satisfying relationship" (Harder, 2002) after he is abandoned by his primary caretaker and left isolated in the woods. Tod meets a lady fox, and Big Mama tells him to "be natural" and he'll get a "whole lot of satisfaction" when he feels "natural affection" (Walt Disney Productions, 1981).

The resolution of *The Fox and the Hound* deals with the dilemmas of production and wisdom that are most prevalent in middle age and later in life, showing the audience that the correct way to benefit society is through the creation of a family and recovery from sacrifices, the fruits of inner strength and integrity, rather than succumbing to despair. Because Tod has found a meaningful relationship in his life, he will be able to "perpetuate culture and transmit values of the culture through the family" (Harder, 2002) instead of despairing forever over the loss of his friend Copper. At the climax of *The Fox and the Hound*, Tod must make the choice between his friend on the one hand and his wife and future family on the other. He ultimately chooses family, illustrating to the audience that the correct choice is always family, regardless of the sacrifices that must be made for its sake. Copper's role confusion has been hidden under his great desire for a role, even if he has an inkling that he does not like the role that has been chosen for him. The developmental stage of production often leads to struggles with "fear of inactivity or meaninglessness" (Harder, 2002), and indeed, at this point Copper must deal with the question of whether he has produced something of real value in his life and is living it to the fullest. While Tod chooses his family over Copper in this climactic scene, he finally comes to Copper's rescue at the end of the movie by fighting off a bloodthirsty bear. Copper reciprocates by protecting Tod from being killed by his master. This demonstrates that the movie's initial portrayal of trust and confidence in others holds true and is still socially necessary.

*The Fox and the Hound* is an example of socially correct responses to the trials of growing up. Developmental changes move from being dependent on “what is done to us” to “what we do” (Harder, 2002) as the question of one’s role in society surfaces, and children are expected to move from openness and trust to devotion and competence in the role society deals to them. The trials of Tod and Copper in *The Fox and the Hound* illustrate that these roles should not be violated—a fox will remain prey while a hound will remain hunter—but they can be molded to allow for individual happiness, whether this be accomplished through the restoration of a friendship, a significant relationship, or finding the meaning and purpose in life.

### Works Cited

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