



The magic of Walt Disney – from literature to screen

Is literature from the past still relevant today? The answer is...look at **Walt Disney's production!** 2023 marks the 100th anniversary of the opening of Walt Disney Studios, an adventure that has changed the way people perceive literature and movies.

Walt Disney's great entertainment films based upon children's literature have gained him more recognition than any of his other endeavours. [...] None was designed to reflect the literary elements of theme, characterization and writing style found in the original books. [...] Disney sought the memorable drama, the action and the villainy long-remembered by the reader after finishing the original of a well-known book. He planned his film versions around satisfying emotional experiences that would remain with the viewer.¹

But, who was Walter Disney?

Walter "Walt" Disney was born in 1901 in Chicago. He took drawing classes at school and started drawing as a cartoonist for the school paper. When Disney was 16 he joined the Red Cross and was sent to France for a year as an ambulance driver during WWI. After meeting the cartoonist **Ubbe Eert Iwwerks**, he started experimenting new techniques doing hand-drawn animation and in 1919 he decided to open his own animation company. He started with the so called **Laugh-O-Grams** that soon became very popular. In 1923 he moved to Hollywood with his brother and the cartoonist Iwwerks and opened the Disney Brothers' Cartoon Studio that soon changed its name to Walt Disney Studios.

Disney's first successful film starring Mickey Mouse was a sound-and-music-equipped animated short called Steamboat Willie. It opened at the Colony Theater in New York November 18, 1928. Sound had just made its way into film, and Disney was the voice of Mickey, a character he had developed and that was drawn by his chief animator, Ub Iwerks. The cartoon was an instant sensation.²

From this moment on he started producing some of the most popular films ever. Many of them taken from English literary masterpieces.

WALT DISNEY AND ENGLISH LITERATURE

ALICE IN WONDERLAND

Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures In Wonderland became the first animated Disney film to take inspiration from English literature. In the Disney version, elements from both the original novel and the sequel Through The Looking-Glass were combined to give a precise idea of Carroll's world.

TEACHING MATERIAL FROM LIT HUB

Carroll, *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland, A blind fury*

After reading and analysing the passage [watch the scene taken from the movie](#).

Compare and contrast the two documents.

MARY POPPINS

Mary Poppins, like many other Disney movies, began as a series of books by the British author P.L. Travers. Both in the books and in the movie, Mary Poppins is a magical nanny who watches over two children named Jane and Michael Banks. Not only this movie takes inspiration from English literature but also considers some social and historical problems of that period such as the movement of the suffragettes.

TEACHING MATERIAL FROM GREAT INSPIRATIONS

Mary Poppins: <https://www.rizzolieducation.it/content/uploads/2023/10/mary-poppins-1.pdf>

THE JUNGLE BOOK

The Jungle Book is a collection of stories by the English author Rudyard Kipling. The protagonist, Mowgli is found in a basket in the Indian jungle. He is adopted by a wolf family which raises him. The most famous adaptation of the book is of course Disney's version even if this version was not intended to be loyal to the original.

TEACHING MATERIAL

[Read chapter 1](#).

And answer the questions:

- What was the Law of the Jungle? Name some of the rules.
- Do you think that people have a sort of "Rule of the Jungle"?

Watch the beginning of the movie.

What are the main differences between the book and Disney's adaptation?

THE LION KING

It is confirmed in the 1994 special edition DVD release of the film, *The Lion King: Platinum Edition* that this film is based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hamlet and Simba are princes and have no siblings. Both have evil uncles: Scar who kills Mufasa and Claudius who is already king at the beginning of the play. The similarities are countless so why not helping your students studying Shakespeare with the *Lion King*?

TEACHING MATERIAL FROM LIT HUB

Hamlet: <https://www.rizzolieducation.it/content/uploads/2023/10/Hamlet-1.pdf>

Now make a list of the characters that resemble one another in *The Lion King* and *Hamlet*.

THE LION KING HAMLET SIMILARITIES

Simba Hamlet Both princes with no siblings....

TREASURE PLANET

A dying pirate, a map and a treasure. These are the main ingredients of one of the most famous adventure novels in English literature: *Treasure Island* by R.L. Stevenson.

NOTE BIBLIOGRAFICHE

1. May, Jill P. 1981. "*Walt Disney's Interpretation of Children's Literature.*" *Language Arts* 58, no. 4 (April)
2. <https://www.biography.com/business-leaders/walt-disney>