

Up: Gerontological Review

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Disney Pixar's 2007 *Up* was not only successful movie but for many people in my generation, a first for movies with an elderly main character. The movie did however conform quite vehemently to many stereotypes we so often see with elder characters.

Physical stereotypes were the most obvious and were seen throughout the movie from start to finish. The introduction showed the growth of Mr. Fredricksen and his wife throughout which the pains of "getting old" were apparent. When they were young the couple was off adventuring, running around, and generally being kids outdoors. Even when Mr. Fredricksen falls and breaks his arm his recovery is swift and the injury is little more than a temporary nuisance. They run up the hill toward the tree without a care in the world. As they age, though, their activities shift to adulting, following a schedule, going to work, maintaining a home, etc. You also see them get more experienced within their jobs as Mr. Fredricksen effortlessly leans on his balloon stand before it flies away, unlike the jump it took when he was new to his job. The repeated tie tying done by his wife has a way of getting across the monotony that adult life can become, as well as how fast time flies. In the span of minutes we watched two people grow. We also see the climbing of the hill slow as they age, until it is eventually enough to put Mr. Fredricksen's wife in the hospital. By this point Mr. Fredricksen also has his infamous tennis ball cane, a symbol of his frailty and the age he has gathered. As the movie goes on we continue to see displays of his age most often through his hearing aids acting up, or his joints popping to an absurd degree, or even the fight scene in which not only do both of their backs lock up at the same time, but Mr. Fredricksen saves himself by launching his dentures! The very concept of an elderly fight scene is rather humorous and scary at the same time. Stepping back again, the death of his wife had a severe impact on Mr. Fredricksen in a personal way that also managed to emotionally tie the viewer to the movie and his character.

The personality stereotypes are almost as glaring as the physical ones, and often equally as “hollywoodized”. His chosen activities were those befitting a retired man, waking up too early, cleaning a lot, and sitting on the porch, etc. but what really stood out were his feelings and personality traits that we saw very early in the movie. His house is locked up with a dozen locks, an emphasis of his paranoia gained with age. His stubbornness is also apparent in the fact that he won’t sell his house regardless of the money offered, and his refusal to go to a retirement home. He’s also quite sour to all but Russel, who’s a kid, another stereotyped trait of the elderly. Even with Russel his patience was thin, but it was certainly better than the insults he yelled to the adults. The injury he inflicted upon the construction manager, and outburst of passion due to what the mailbox and house represented to him, was another example of his “elder temper”.

It’s also important to look at the personality changes we saw in his character as the movie progressed, though. He began a “sour old man”, spiteful of the world in which he lived and closed off from any meaningful relationships or experiences because he simply didn’t care anymore. The adventure began with a simple spiteful whim but became a real adventure quite quickly, and one that Mr. Fredricksen got quite wrapped up in. He promised his wife that he’d get that house to the falls and that’s what he set out to do. When he found his childhood hero he lit up like a kid on halloween! Giddy with excitement, and shattered when his hero was revealed as the villain. When Kevin was captured and Russel went to go get her, Mr. Fredricksen realized he now had more to live for and drastically changed his attitude, and even his attire, in his effort to save them both. He even achieved actions that require greater strength and agility than he previously revealed. In this sense Mr. Fredricksen had almost regressed in age back to being an older adult rather than elderly. When he pinned the badge on Russel Mr. Fredricksen no longer fit the elder personality stereotypes and instead had fallen back with the other parents. In Russel he found not only the child he never had, but a love of life that I think we stereotypically see most in the young, not the old.

Looking at Mr. Fredricksen through the lens of Continuity Theory we can attempt to examine how he became who he did both at the beginning and end of the movie. As a child he and his wife were adventurers. They spent their free time playing make believe, running around, climbing things, general kid stuff. The kind of kid stuff that you don't get to do when you're older. Even when they got jobs they chose professions that are arguably more adventurous than most. Zoology is certainly an exciting field, and one that requires a good bit of reaction time on occasion. Selling balloons is more sedentary but much more exciting than an office job. He got to interact with children, parents, his wife, and likely animals on a daily basis. Their jobs continued to fuel their spirit of adventure (ha ha! See what I did there?). Old age stole that from him. With age comes frailty that doesn't mesh well with adventure. He likely looked at elderly people his whole life and thought negative things because they were boring to him. Becoming what you've historically seen as boring can't be fun. He even tried to scrape together what adventure he still had left in him when he bought the tickets, but when his wife died it likely shattered what little he had left.

Likely the only thing that brought him back out of his suffocated mindset was Russel and the adventure they had together. I gave him not only something to work towards but it showed him that you don't have to be young and nimble to explore or have fun. It wasn't until saving Kevin and Russel that he saw how much he could actually do! He zip-lined down a garden hose with his cane for crying out loud! It took a complete reassessment of what it meant to be old before he could really be happy again, and it would've required an entire redefinition of all of his previous life. Maybe we shouldn't judge being old until we actually experience it.

Exchange theory is a little harder to apply to the movie due to the dynamics of what few relationships this movie actually covers but it can still be seen. Early on Mr. Fredricksen had little offer to others beyond selling his house. As such he's a shut in. The only people he talks to are the construction workers trying to get his house. When Russel showed up he even tried to shoo the kid away quite quickly because the kid had nothing of value to Mr. Fredricksen. Russel returned because

Mr. Fredricksen did have what Russel needed, a means of getting his final junior wilderness explorer badge. When they ended up stranded in paradise falls they stuck with each other out of necessity. Russel needed protection and a way home, and Mr. Fredricksen was the only one who could offer it. By the end of their adventure, Mr. Fredricksen was the father figure that Russel needed, and Russel the child figure the Mr. Fredricksen needed. They stayed friends because they each had something to gain from the other, it just took a while for them both to see it.

Up certainly holds many stereotypes towards elderly people but it also manages to break the trends that are seen too often in media. Many of the traits that make up Mr. Fredricksen were integral parts of who his character needed to be for the movie to work and it certainly emphasized the changes of his character throughout the movie. It makes one think about what it really means to be old, and how much control we have over ourselves. Everybody gets old but it's up to us to say how we're going to feel about it.