**An Analysis of "Let It Go" in Disney's *Frozen***

Disney's latest film "Frozen" is receiving rave reviews, and the song ["Let It Go"](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moSFlvxnbgk) is one of the highlights of the film. Don't take my word for it - [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frozen_%282013_film%29), as usual, is great for such simple background facts. I am currently having an internal debate about whether [Elsa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elsa_%28Disney%29) is my favorite Disney character, and whether "Let It Go" is my favorite Disney song - time will tell, but I'm leaning towards "yes" on both questions. On my Google search history, there are queries such as "let it go is brilliant" and "frozen let it go analysis", but having found nothing satisfactory, I've decided to write this post instead.

There has been much written about "Let It Go", and a typical opinion on the song is that it is "liberating" or "empowering", that it is about Elsa coming into her true identity, and that it is a jubilant celebration of release for those who have been living in fear or bondage. But while all this is true as far as that goes, stopping the analysis there misses the great depth and subtlety of the song. Yes, the song is about empowerment, but there is also tragedy, anger, bitterness, and self-deception in it, in even greater measure. It doesn't mark Elsa's claiming of her identity or her apotheosis - instead, by the end of the song, she is in severe danger of losing herself. The song does lift her up, but only to set her perched atop a high precipice, with slippery slopes falling into a [despair event horizon](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DespairEventHorizon) on one side and a [moral event horizon](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MoralEventHorizon) on the other. The potency of the song derives not from how uplifting or positive it is, but rather how perfectly it fits into the overall narrative, and how much it does to develop Elsa into a compelling, relatable character.

First, consider the placement of the song in the whole movie. Elsa has just run away from her own coronation, and has brought the eternal winter upon Arendelle. The song itself only marks the end of the [first act](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ThreeActStructure). The story has just begun, so this cannot be the end of the character development for Elsa - it is actually only the end of the beginning, and the primary function of the song is to set down the conflicts that Elsa must go through - the demons that she must face - before the story is over. In fact, much of the rest of the story will be played out to specifically reverse many of the most triumphant lines of her song. Consider the following:

Elsa sings several times, "Let the storm rage on", referring to her stormy heart and mind. (The weather itself is actually quite calm for most of the song). She also sings that she's now free. She is trying to convince herself that she can live with the turmoil inside. But, in Elsa's next scene ([For The First Time In Forever (Reprise)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=g9-rEEj-1uE#t=72)), she is confronted with what she's done to Arendelle and sings, "Oh, I'm such a fool, I can't be free / No escape from this storm inside of me", driving her further toward despair. So she takes back what she had said, in her very next scene. She is, in fact, not yet free and is not fine with the storm raging on inside her.

In "Let It Go", the line "Let the storm rage on" is followed by "The cold never bothered me anyway" - a line many people remember, as it's said twice, sung in a different style, and is the last line of the song. Of course, as the Snow Queen, Elsa is not bothered by low temperatures in the literal sense. But in the other senses of the word "cold", she is still frightened of it. Uncontrolled release of her powers still remains the primary problem in the story, and after building her ice palace she is never again happy while using her powers, until the end of the movie.

Most importantly, "cold" as in isolation from other people, is still bothering her to the core. Think about what she does after she finishes her song, right after she sings that last line "the cold never bothered me anyway": she turns around and slams shut the doors to her new castle, as she had done in Arendelle. Her way of dealing with her problem is still the same as it was before her coronation: she thinks as long as she shuts people out - and if that doesn't work, as long as she's far enough away and isolated and alone - she'll be okay. But this is diametrically opposed to the central message of the film - that instead of not being bothered by the cold of isolation, she needs to be embraced by the warmth of love. The movie cannot end until she recants this sly, subtle line, which she does only at the climax. Until then, Elsa is lying to herself.

Another line in the song that's a self deception is when she says "You'll never see me cry". Both this line and "the cold never bothered me anyway" are the kind of things said by people who are trying to convince themselves; they are not usually said by people for whom this is simply true. Of course, we do see Elsa cry over Anna at the end, as a testament to the love that Elsa has for her. Again, by negating this very line in the song and shedding tears, she is finally becoming the person she wants to be. Elsa finds her identity and finally comes into her own character, not in embracing the message of these lines in "Let It Go", but in rejecting them in the climax.

Additional examples abound. Elsa sings "here I stand, and here I'll stay", and "I'm never going back". But of course, she does go back to Arendelle. She eventually abandons the ice palace (while keeping the new dress and hair). She sings "That perfect girl is gone", but in the end, she does in fact become the perfect girl she always wanted to be - fully in command of her powers, and on top of that beloved of her sister and her people. She sings "the past is in the past", but her final salvation comes from her relationship with her sister, stemming from Elsa's deepest past.

Lastly in the matter of lyrics, consider the title of the song itself, "Let It Go", which is sung repeatedly. What is she letting go of? Firstly and most obviously, it refers to Elsa letting go of the restraints of her powers, to "see what [she] can do / to test the limits and breaking through". This is the positive element in the song, and what most listeners unfortunately latch on to, to the exclusion of other elements. Personal empowerment is obviously good. If you look carefully at Elsa's expressions while she's singing, the few tens of seconds around this line is the only time she is genuinely happy. But personal empowerment, though good, is fraught with danger, as indicated by the next line: "No right, no wrong, no rules for me".

Seriously, how many characters say something like that and not become evil? These are probably the most telling lines for picking up on the narrative meaning of the song. And that is the second thing that she's letting go of: her sense of right and wrong, of the rules and restrictions that being a "good girl" imposed on her releasing her powers. Now obviously some of the rules constraining her before were restrictive and counterproductive, but they were also for the safety of others. How much of that is she letting go? Only some specific rules? All of it? The entire concept of goodness? We don't know, but her singing "No right, no wrong, no rules for me" should have set off alarm bells in the audience's heads. "Let It Go" was originally meant as a [villain song](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/VillainSong), and Disney wanted the possibility of Elsa being a villain to be alive in the audience's minds. We are supposed to be worried for Elsa's soul at this point, and the rest of her character development is about how she is saved from her precarious position.

Elsa is also letting go of any hope or desire of companionship with people. This is the third meaning of "let it go". If the above second meaning of "let it go" indicated an erosion of Elsa's goodness, this third meaning indicates an erosion of her hope. The second meaning pushes Elsa towards evil, the third meaning pushes her towards despair. The second meaning may lead to villainy, and the third meaning may lead to tragedy. She has decided to stay away from all that she loves, and she's tried to convince herself that she's fine with that.

Look again at Elsa's expressions as she sings "Let It Go", especially during the lines that I've mentioned above. Open up the [video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moSFlvxnbgk), put it on a HD resolution, and slow down the speed to 0.25 during key moments. Or go see my [study of Elsa's facial expressions](http://www.naclhv.com/2014/02/elsas-facial-expressions-during-let-it.html) during "Let It Go". Look for the emotions flitting across her face almost frame by frame. She switches rapidly between resignation, bitterness, giddy happiness, genuine smiles, sorrow weighing down her brow, anger, resolve, and many mixtures of these emotions. Some of the most negative emotions are on Elsa's face during some of the most triumphant lines. The animators, songwriters, and the singer did a remarkable job of conveying all this in this beautifully crafted, intricately complicated song - it's a pity that many people simply see a positive empowerment song.

"Let It Go" informs the audience of the evil and the despair that Elsa has the potential to fall into, while keeping her a completely sympathetic character. Her empowerment, while clearly a good thing, also raises the danger that she may fall one way or another. It makes the audience able to relate to her while at the same time causing us to be wary of her and worried for her. Who hasn't felt that they could become more powerful if only they let go of other people and their restrictions and morality? Who hasn't felt that there is nothing they could do in certain helpless situations, powerless despite their abilities? And who hasn't felt their soul imperiled by these feelings? For all these reasons, despite being the only human with superpowers, Elsa is the most real, relatable character in "Frozen".

After setting up this remarkable character in "Let It Go", the rest of the film is about showing how Elsa successfully navigates these potential ruins and comes to be a wholly good person, worthy to be a heroine in one of Disney's best films. She has some close calls - she nearly became evil in rebuffing the visitors and intruders in her castle. She did despair when she thought Anna was dead. But through Anna's deep love and help from the others, she earns her happy ending.

I think that if you take "Let It Go" simply as an uplifting empowerment song, you rob Elsa of a great deal of her intricate characterization. You collapse her into a two-dimensional character. If the song was entirely positive, if her soul was not in actual danger of ruin when the song ended, then she loses her agency for character development. She simply becomes someone nice and powerful who reacts to what happens in her environment. She would not be fundamentally all that different in the end than she was in the middle. To be a fully fleshed out character, Elsa's empowerment must also imperil her.

It has to be this way because it's true in real life. We have heard that "with great power comes great responsibility". We have heard that "nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power". We know that "power corrupts". Unfortunately, this is not a sentiment I hear often among many groups who have recently become empowered. There is much talk about how good and progressive and positive personal empowerment is. But not many are saying to these people that power is not a right or a privilege, but a sacred charge, to be used for doing and becoming good.

Thankfully, we have in Elsa a wonderfully compelling character who perfectly combines all these points. And thank you Disney, for bringing us a beautiful song, a superb character, and an excellent film.