

---

## The Portrayal of Female Villains: A Representation Study on *Cruella*

Livia Traesar<sup>1</sup>, Nur Saktiningrum<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

✉: liviatraesar@mail.ugm.ac.id

---

### ABSTRACT

The portrayal of female villains in media and movies has evolved significantly, as evidenced through the lens of Stuart Hall's representation theory and film analysis concepts. Traditionally confined to one-dimensional roles perpetuating gender stereotypes, contemporary cinema showcases multi-dimensional characters like those in *Cruella*, challenging societal norms and defying traditional gender expectations. By employing narrative and non-narrative film analysis techniques, these characters are revealed as agents of subversion and empowerment, embodying a new archetype of female villains characterized by individual agency and autonomy. However, despite this progress, the lingering impact of gender stereotypes persists, influencing how female villains are depicted on screen. Thus, ongoing critical analysis and advocacy for more diverse and authentic representations of women in media remain crucial.

Keywords: *female villain; film analysis; gender stereotype; portrayal of female antagonists; representation*

Article information  
(Filled by Editorial  
Management)

Received: 17 Mar, 2024

Revised: 15 Oct, 2024

Accepted: 16 Oct, 2024

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.22146/rubikon.v11i2.94900>

Available at <https://jurnal.ugm.ac.id/rubikon/article/view/94900>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License

---

### INTRODUCTION

Historically, the moral binary between heroes and villains has shaped societal judgments, where heroes embody

ideal values and villains represent antithetical, negative traits. This dichotomy, deeply rooted in fairy tales and children's literature, has often portrayed

villains as purely evil, lacking any complexity or redeeming qualities (Kokoroski, 2012). Female villains, in particular, have been portrayed as rejecting societal norms, challenging patriarchal structures, and representing a threat to masculinity. These characters, ranging from mythological figures like Medusa to modern cinematic portrayals, often intersect themes of sexuality, power, and morality. As Beverly Gross argues, the portrayal of women as "bitches" has evolved, reflecting broader societal changes in the perception of female power and aggression (Gross, 1994). The femme fatale, one of the most well-known archetypes of female villainy, epitomizes the subversion of traditional female roles and the rejection of moral virtue. Yet, the portrayal of female villains has evolved, with recent cinematic depictions offering more nuanced and sympathetic interpretations. Notably, Disney has contributed to this trend, revamping classic female villains like Maleficent, Cruella de Vil, and others by providing them with backstories that humanize their motivations.

For example, Disney's *Maleficent* (2014) reimagined the character not as a purely

evil figure but as one shaped by betrayal, adding depth to her villainy. Similarly, *Cruella* (2021) transformed the notorious animal killer into a more complex, relatable figure. In contrast to her original depiction as a fashion-obsessed villain in *101 Dalmatians*, Cruella's backstory reveals her as a misunderstood anti-hero, whose ambition and creativity were shaped by hardship and injustice.

This evolution of female villains is also part of a broader cultural shift. Historically, female villains were often portrayed as mentally unstable, morally corrupt, or as femmes fatales, as seen in films like *Basic Instinct* and *Double Indemnity*. However, modern depictions, like *Cruella*, move away from these simplistic representations, offering more developed characters who embody female empowerment and challenge traditional gender roles. The character of Cruella, for instance, is not only a villain but also a symbol of independence and resilience.

The shifting portrayal of female villains reflects broader changes in societal attitudes towards women, power, and morality. The trend of providing backstories and motivations to female villains

allows for a more nuanced exploration of their characters, moving beyond stereotypes of female villainy as purely evil or malevolent. In doing so, films like *Cruella* highlight the complexities of gender, power, and morality, offering a more mature and multifaceted portrayal of women in villainous roles.

The case of *Cruella* underscores the evolving nature of film as a reflection of societal values and ideologies. While traditional films often depict women waiting to be rescued by men, modern films increasingly feature strong, independent female characters who navigate challenges and assert their agency. The film's portrayal of *Cruella* marks a departure from the traditional villain archetype, illustrating how female characters in film are being redefined in contemporary media.

In conclusion, the portrayal of female villains has transformed significantly, particularly in recent years. Characters like *Cruella* demonstrate how the traditional villain archetype is being deconstructed and reimagined, offering a more complex and empowering representation of female agency. As the portrayal of female characters in media continues to evolve, it

reflects the ongoing changes in societal attitudes towards gender, power, and morality.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Creswell (2009, 26) identifies three primary research methodologies for conducting analysis: qualitative research, quantitative research, and mixed research. The utilization of each methodology is contingent upon the specific inquiry and its objective. Throughout this study, the primary subject of analysis is a narrative work in the form of a film titled "*Cruella*." As to McKee (in Ida, 2011), narrative literature encompasses a wide range of mediums such as written works, pictures, videos, photos, graphic design, song lyrics, and more, all of which serve the purpose of conveying meaning. This study employs a qualitative methodology, as suggested by Creswell (2009, 258), "the process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, collecting data, setting analyzing the data, building from particular to general themes and the last will be making the interpretations of the meaning of the data". Qualitative research method is a valuable tool for investigating and comprehending the significance attributed by individuals or

groups to social or human issues.

The paradigm of post-nationalist American Studies is central to this research as it allows for an examination of characters like Cruella within broader global and cultural contexts, rather than limiting the analysis to traditional nationalist frameworks. Post-nationalism, as Rowe (2000) suggests, challenges the concept of American Exceptionalism by recognizing the United States as a multicultural entity, where various ethnic and cultural identities intersect (Rowe, 2000, 23). This paradigm shifts the focus from a singular national identity to a more inclusive and critical perspective that embraces the diversity of voices, including those historically marginalized in American narratives, such as ethnic minorities and women (Rowe, 2000, 6).

In the context of this study, post-nationalist American Studies provides a useful framework for analyzing how female villains, particularly Cruella, are portrayed in global media and how these representations interact with broader themes of gender, power, and identity. By moving beyond the nation-state as the primary determinant of

identity, this approach allows for a more nuanced exploration of how cultural products, like films, reflect and influence transnational discourses on gender and societal norms.

Furthermore, while the paradigm originates from American Studies, its application in this research extends beyond the U.S. context to include global influences in media and culture. The character of Cruella, as analyzed in this study, exemplifies post-nationalist ideals as she transcends national boundaries and operates within a consumer culture that reflects global trends in fashion, class, and gender dynamics (Cairns & Johnston, 2014). By doing so, the research questions examine not only the character's role in American media but also her relevance within a larger, post-nationalist consumer culture that affects global audiences.

This approach is vital for understanding how films like Cruella challenge traditional narratives of villainy and engage with feminist and post-nationalist critiques. It situates the character within a broader conversation about how media reflects diverse identities, power structures, and societal changes, making

the analysis relevant in both American and global contexts.

### **Representation Theory**

The theory applied within the topic, which is the representation theory by Stuart Hall, analyzes the villain character of the movie *Cruella*. To find how *Cruella* is represented in the movie and why *Cruella* is represented as an image of a Villain in the movie. The approach and theories are applied to answer the research problem. In addition, representation is a crucial step in the process by which meaning is created and exchanged among culture members.

This section focuses on the practices of representation, a crucial aspect of cultural studies. Representation connects meaning and language to culture, and it involves using language, signs, and images to represent the world meaningfully. There are three different accounts or theories: reflective, intentional, and constructionist approaches to representation. Reflective language reflects existing meanings, while intentional language expresses the speaker's intended meaning. Constructionist language is constructed in and through language, with the constructionist approach being

the most significant in recent years.

Representation involves the production of meaning through language. The word "represent" can be translated as "to describe or depict" something, "to symbolize," "stand for," or "substitute for." In Christianity, the cross represents the suffering and crucifixion of Christ, while the figures in the painting of the crucifixion of Christ represent the story of Cain and Abel. The constructionist approach to representation challenges the very nature of representation, as it questions the very nature of meaning and how language is used to convey meaning. In this research, the present writer chooses the constructionist approach to understanding the process of representation. Hall (13) argued that representations are not simply reflections of reality but are actively constructed through a complex interplay of differences, power, and cultural practices. This research analyzes the representation of a Villain in a movie who is portrayed by society's standards and has different meanings to interpret the portrayal of *Cruella*.

Fiske (1987) explains the relationship between television and culture. Culture is the generation and

circulation of meanings and pleasures within a society, and television is a bearer and provoker of meanings and pleasures in that society. In the process of cultural interactions, "meanings, consequently, will always change, from one culture or period to another" (Hall, 1997, 61). Facilitated by media technologies, the cultural globalization process has not only been transforming contemporary American society but also attracted the attention of global communication scholars and practitioners to the cultural changes in America.

Hall (1997) applied this theory to analyze how movie forms represent race, class, gender, and sexuality in various ways and how these representations affect the identities and relations of different social groups. He also criticized the dominant or hegemonic representations that tend to marginalize, stereotype, or exclude the voices and experiences of the oppressed or subaltern groups (Hall, 1997, 236).

This theory is used to answer the problem in the analysis chapter on how Cruella being represented as a female villain with the use of constructionist representation creates meaning by connecting

three different orders of things: the conceptual world, the present writer's internal thoughts, and the signs that are structured into languages (Hall, 1997, 45). The present writer utilizes the language system as a tool to transmit how movie forms represent race, class, gender, and sexuality in various ways and how these representations have an impact on the identities and relationships of various social groups. The author also uses the female villain characters in the movie to translate what representation means.

### **Stereotyping**

Central topics about differences between power and cultural practices are represented as "Other." To establish a connection between those words is the use of stereotyping. Power and Ideology: Hall argues that cultural representations are not neutral but reflect the dominant ideologies and power relations in society. Stereotypes often align with these dominant ideologies and serve to maintain existing power structures. They can reinforce social hierarchies and perpetuate unequal power dynamics by marginalizing or stigmatizing certain groups (Hall, 1997, 237).

Othering and Difference: Stereotypes are closely linked to the "the Other" concept in Hall's representation theory. Stereotyping contributes to the process of "Othering," where marginalized or different groups are positioned as outside the dominant norms. Stereotypes simplify and essential the identities and experiences of "the Other," reinforcing their difference and inferiority in relation to the dominant group (Hall, 1997, 237). Hall also wants to understand more precisely how gender, race, ethnic groups, or social status are represented from the analysis of pictures, newspaper and magazine articles, TV shows, and movies. The stereotype concept that Hall proposed had clear ramifications for film studies, particularly in terms of character analysis, criticism of the inaccurate portrayal of socially marginalized groups, a new perspective on film history, and even drawing attention to the social function of stereotypes in some specific situations.

One of the ways stereotypes works is by giving the impression that there is this or that. However, stereotypes are also challenging to avoid. This situation is the same as the portrayal of a female as the villain character in a

movie and became a favorite because, villain characters in films have distinct characteristics that have been ingrained for a long time, particularly male villains, such as the Joker. Although the Joker is described as an evil and psychopathic character, his character is a mortal enemy of Batman and has a character that is no less famous than the main hero character, Batman. Joker's character is like his fans, despite his character seeming more psychotic and wilder.

In specific fictional works, the Villain has a distinct function, often serving as the hero's accent to highlight just how valiant the hero is. The heroic heroes will be less effective without enemies, and the story will appear flat and lifeless. It draws attention to the idea that the villains give the hero a conflict to fight and a motivation to fight. (Faria, 2008, p. 53). (Paula Soares Faria 2008, *The Journey of the Villain in the Harry Potter series: an archetypal*). The term "villain" often conjures images of individuals engaging in "sneakiness, backbiting, innuendo, mudslinging, bullying, domineering, quarrel-picking, and cruelty," while the protagonist typically embodies "pluck, cockiness in an underdog, audacity, humor,

satire, honest man-to-man slugging, and nonviolent pressure" (Bergstrand & Jasper, 2018, p. 230). Villains are created to evoke intense feelings of dread and hatred in audiences. They deflect blame, turning anxiety and irritation into outrage and motivation, and transforming worry into anger (Gamson, 1992, p. 29). Additionally, villains serve to reinforce negative attitudes toward outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

The stereotype that a female character could be a villain may not be as popular as a female who has a good and gentle nature because society generally prefers women to have a loving nature, so that stereotype is still produced continuously (Connell, 2005). Eventually, the assumption arose that when women behave not as they should, like not gentle feminine, they would be considered monsters. The concept of a monster, in this case, Monstrous women, a given name by Rosi Braidotti (1994) in her book entitled *Embodiment and Sexual Difference in a Contemporary Feminist Theory*, refers to the inherent nature of something that is seen to be of lower or inferior status, hence deviating from the society definition of what is considered "normal" (Chelsea Picken). The result is 'extreme

othering,' which is an extreme relation since people labeled monsters are incapable of living in harmony with society and living according to what society wants.

To see Cruella as a villain, especially a female villain representing her character in the movie, Stuart Hall's theory of representation highlights how movie narrative and images are imbued with ideology and how this can be resisted. In the context of female villains, Hall's binary form of representation can be seen in the example of Prince Phillip and Maleficent in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, where Phillip is the hero and Maleficent is the Villain. However, recent 21st-century fairy tale narratives have offered more complex representations of female villains, imbuing them with agency, institutional power, and well-developed narrative arcs (Natalie et al., 2022).

According to Stuart Hall's representation theory (Hall, 1997, pp. 18-20), movie representations are not neutral or objective but constructed through selection, emphasis, and interpretation. Cruella's representation as a villain is not inherent to her character but instead constructed through various cultural codes and conventions. That means Cruella



is represented through many background reasons, not merely as a villain with the opposite characteristics of the protagonist. Cruella's portrayal as a villain often reinforces stereotypes and norms. Her ambition, assertiveness, and lack of maternal instincts are often associated with negative feminine traits, while her male counterparts are often depicted as heroic or sympathetic. Overall, Cruella's representation as a villain is not simply a reflection of her character but rather a product of constructed cultural stereotyping and conventions that shape our understanding of gender, morality, and culture. The present writer uses the construction of otherness, stereotyping, exclusion, and power as the notions of stereotyping proposed by Hall to identify representative practices to address the second primary problem, which is why Cruella is not being portrayed as a stereotypical female villain.

### **Film Analysis**

To analyze this film to answer the two main problems in this research through this film analysis concept, it would take some methods with the same methods to analyze them. Analyzing literature and movies entails evaluating and

understanding various narrative and aesthetic expression modalities. Although the two media have clear distinctions, there are also many ways that similar analyses can be conducted. Even though they are two different mediums, each with its distinctive qualities, literature, and film have several components in common that lend themselves to comparable analytical methods. To completely recognize and analyze the aesthetic merits of each, one must have a working knowledge of the story, the characters, the themes, the symbolism, and the creative decisions made by the authors of each work (Adi, 2016, p. 53). The approach has two parts: extrinsic, which covers social, cultural, economic, and philosophical factors, and intrinsic. At the same time, intrinsic research focuses on the movie or several movies to identify a pattern. Treating a movie as an "art film" rather than a mainstream story is typical (Adi, 2016, p. 57).

Within the scope of literary studies, research about popular fiction in the form of film intrinsically tends to not be carried out and is considered difficult because it could be considered film studies. In literary studies, films that are studied intrinsically are

the same as intrinsic studies of novels. However, in the film, the elements are different from the novel even though the pattern is almost the same, which are characterization and point of view, editing and narrative structure, and style of language (Adi, 2016, 59).

Based on the explanation of the theoretical frameworks above, the use of theoretical framework from representations by Stuart Hall to analyze the stereotyping of female villains portrayed in a movie until film analysis concept to analyze this research. The concept of othering in Stuart Hall's explanation of aspects of society has the power to stereotype society. This leads to a constructionist portrayal of Cruella through films that represent how women become villains just by looking at how they dress, behave, or speak. The male gaze by Laura Mulvey states that film becomes one of the tools to satisfy the portrayal of women in the eyes of men, how females see another female, and how females see themselves (Mulvey, 1975). The portrayal of Cruella is to satisfy some genders, which gives rise to stereotypes of how female villains should be seen or portrayed. Therefore, female villains have the characteristics to be called

villains. Through films, females can also be viewed with a view that is focused on the satisfaction of men's views, females towards females, and females towards themselves, which impacts real and daily life.

### **Narrative Analysis**

Narrative analyses are performed by two main aspects in the film on both the story and the storyline. It is a process of analyzing the film through. Combining the story and the storyline (Ida, 2011, p. 92). This process is conducted to give an understanding of how the story and the storyline are structured. During this process, the narrative units have been chosen to analyze to find any evidence provided.

Those narrative units are the storyline or the plot itself and the characters. The characters become the important unit to be analyzed as the stereotype is displayed by them. The plot or the storyline is also important for the analysis because it shows the stereotypes of female villains in the film. The character is analyzed through the storyline of the film. After finishing with the character and the storyline, the plot is deemed important for the present writer to continue the analysis

as it shows the stereotype, and this becomes the base of character analysis.

### **Non-Narrative Analysis**

The non-narrative part of the work is providing the writer with a deeper understanding of the underlying meaning. Evidence that cannot be found in the narrative is currently unavailable. The non-narrative elements selected for this research include shot composition, camera angle, and color, including how the characters look such as their clothes, hair, and make-up. Given that the focus of this study is a film, it is crucial to acknowledge the significance of the camera in shaping specific shots and perspectives. To enhance the analysis, the writer must carefully select specific frames to effectively portray the depiction of Cruella being represented as a villain, as each shot category carries significant importance. Angle, as another non-narrative feature, is likewise affected by the camera location. According to Giannetti, angles in film can be classified into five main categories: bird's-eye view, high angle, eye-level shot, low angle, and oblique angle (Laura Mulvey, 13). In addition to shots and perspectives, color plays a crucial role that is equally

significant. The effects of color boosting are frequently observed following its application. Every color process tends to specialize in a specific base hue. Color in film often operates on a subconscious level, evoking intense emotions and conveying specific expressions. Visual artists have used colors for symbolic purposes since ancient times. The Color symbolism is likely to be culturally acquired, while the implications are quite similar in various communities (Giannetti 25). The way characters dress and are portrayed to match their characters also represents how the characters are portrayed on their characteristics. Nevertheless, these non-narrative elements will assist the writer in carrying out the analysis, with its scope being constrained by the character's connection to stereotypes, specifically those related to female villains.

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Female as Villain Characters in Movies and Media**

Cruella de Vil is a fictional character who is widely recognized as one of Disney's most infamous female antagonists. She is notorious for her fixation on Dalmatian fur and her readiness to abduct

pups to fashion a coat from their distinctive markings. The etymology of her name directly incorporates the terms "cruel" and "devil". The character in the new Disney live-action picture, Cruella, is presented with an original narrative approach. The film features Emma Stone as the notorious dog thief before the events in *101 Dalmatians*. It takes place in 1970s London, where the main character, known as Estella at the time, is employed as a fashion designer for the renowned Baroness von Hellman, portrayed by Emma Thompson. Their connection rapidly becomes chaotic, prompting Estella to embrace her mischievous nature, resulting in a fierce power struggle between the mentor and the apprentice. The movie seeks to anthropomorphize the character and furnish her with a past that elucidates her motivations and actions. Furthermore, it delves into the concept of how an individual might transform into a malevolent character and the influence that society exerts in molding human conduct. The portrayal of Cruella as a female antagonist holds great significance as it defies conventional gender norms and assumptions. She is a formidable, self-reliant lady who exhibits fearlessness in pursuing her desires. The complexity and multi-

dimensionality of her persona enhance her relatability and captivate listeners, making her more interesting.

In the context of a fairy tale, Cruella De Vil the change of perspective has two effects. First, it contributes to multi-perspectivity by moving away from the one-sided account of the story. Cruella's actions are motivated, and she transforms from a flat two-dimensional character into a more rounded character. Secondly, it also promotes the reimagining of gender roles that are portrayed by villains. By making the villain have a background story, the focus shifts from the inactive villain character to a more active female. At the same time, she is not depicted as being pure evil anymore, resulting in her character becoming an ambiguous antagonist. Cruella is depicted as a nuanced and intricate individual who challenges conventional gender conventions and societal expectations imposed on women. Her identity is not determined by her interactions with men, and her transformation into Cruella involves accepting her authentic self and defying societal norms around femininity.

The variety of images that are being displayed in popular

culture and the mass media with some commercial advertising images illustrate the use of racial, cultural and gender stereotypes towards female villains. Female villains in films are portrayed with their distinctive characteristics, often depicted through elements such as black clothing and red lipstick to emphasize their villainous nature. But at the same time, the modern villain in movies with the same characteristics was given a background story to complete their background character and was not seen as a flat two-dimensional character. Hall identifies the significance of this ambiguity in relation to how we reference our interpretations and adoptions of other stereotypes from other images seen in media (Hall, 1997, p. 225-283). As mentioned before, from three accounts of representation, constructionist is chosen to analyze this object, because this approach has been recognized in the social character of language. This approach gives advantages in analyzing the meaning through language that is represented by someone (Hall, 1997, 10-11). In this study, three representations are shown in the movie.

### **Female as Other**

Hall (1997) highlights "representational practices: of different of different people "which we call stereotyping:", focusing on differences of representation according to race and ethnicity, as well as gender: "what is said about racial differences could equally be applied in many instances to other dimensions of difference, such as gender, sexuality, class and disability" (Hall, S., 1997, p. 255). Every individual who is attached to a certain stereotype is seen as 'other' and usually 'unacceptable'. Stuart Hall states that stereotyping sets a symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological', the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'other', between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' us and them (248). The representation of another may simply mean that someone or some people are unacceptable in the opinion of the larger community. Female in media and movies is a powerful means to convey information about gender roles in society and various studies have revealed that television advertisements contain gender-stereotypic ideas and images (Lavine et.

al. 1999, p.1049). Such images of females have powerful effects: images of gender in popular culture shape our understandings of femininity and masculinity. According to Peach, such images construct and prescribe how females should look, feel, and act, and how they will be seen by others (Peach 1998, p. 119). Images of gender in popular culture contribute to the 'making' of females (Zoonen 1995, 315).

'Someone Says my wife looked like a man'; 'Somebody says my sister looked like a gorilla' (Hall, S., 1997, p. 232) - Hall shows quotes from black athletes regarding their performance at the 1988 Seoul Olympics and the perception of spectators. These quotes ascribe stereotypically masculine athletic attributes to black female athletes. Consequently, their athletic prowess is not acknowledged and admired independently, but rather linked to male, aggressive, and animalistic qualities, which is derogatory. In many cases, female villains are portrayed as having stereotypically male qualities, such as being aggressive, violent, and ruthless. This is often done to make them seem more threatening and to reinforce gender norms and stereotypes. However, this portrayal can also be seen as

problematic, as it reinforces the idea that women who exhibit these qualities are deviant or abnormal. It is important to acknowledge that there are instances of female antagonists who defy these stereotypes and are depicted as intricate and multi-dimensional characters. These characters can be perceived as defying conventional gender roles and societal expectations. From the start, even her name was portrayed as evil, Cruella De Vil. The name "Cruella de Vil" is not an acronym, but a portmanteau of the words "cruel", "devil", and "evil" (Mooney, 2021). The name "Cruella de Vil" has become synonymous with a person who is cruel and evil. Her characteristics with a fur coat and monochrome hair represent her two sides, wicked and kind.



Figure 1. Glenn Close as Cruella De Vil in her costumes from *101 Dalmatians* (1995)



Figure 2. Catherine Miller  
(Cruella's stepmother)

In the movie, even since she was a child the way she behaves always represented "cruel", hence the name Cruella. Her character was inspired by one of the popular Hollywood actresses in the 1950s, Talulah Bankhead (Solomon, 1995). Her childhood was quite awful, as an unruly child she was sent away to convents and expelled twice because she was once throwing ink at a nun, and another for coming onto one. Although Bankhead maintained the image of herself as a character, there is a more serious side to her that is not as well-known. Despite her drinking, smoking, and multiple relationships with men and women, Bankhead was also a trailblazing political thinker who spent more than three decades promoting causes she believed in. In her biography of the Bankhead family, Deep South Dynasty (2022), historian Kari Frederickson concludes that although Tallulah was largely progressive toward race, she did "maintain many of the class pretensions of the

southern elite." Despite being a "conventional liberal anti-Communist," Bankhead dared to criticize "those standing in the way of equality, her own family included."



Figure 3. I am a woman. Hear me  
roar.

A similar scene also appears in *Cruella*, when she is put into a prestigious private school, and is expelled because of what the school said is misbehavior, but she was fighting against her bully because she is being teased for being a weird child. Even when she was still a baby, she realized she did not fit in society because of her appearance, even without further explanation of the way her visual is being portrayed

people always look differently towards her because stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature (Hall, 1997, 257).



Figure 4. Even when I was born, I was different" (Cruella, 2021, minute: 00:00:43)

in real life, similar dynamics manifest repeatedly in various environments, such as schools, workplaces, politics, and other areas of society.

### **Media Impact of Gender Stereotypes**

Media consumption plays a significant role in shaping societal preconceptions. External factors, including the media, influence perceptions of the world and contribute to the formation of attitudes toward other people and places. The media is among such sources of influence. Given how much media is exposed to in our society, it would be difficult to remain unaffected by what is seen as cultural standards, such as how to think and behave in accordance with gender

stereotypes that are widely disseminated. The influence of popular media on viewers and how gender representations in the media distort viewers' understanding of reality. In today's highly mediated world, access to mass media from various nations has become increasingly widespread, though it is important to acknowledge that access may vary depending on factors such as geography, technological infrastructure, and socio-economic conditions. The significance of the country of origin of the media is sometimes overshadowed by the universal messages that are being sent by the media. In a similar vein, given the volume of Western media that is distributed globally, viewers everywhere should think carefully about how Western culture and ideas are portrayed to avoid reinforcing or emulating untrue preconceptions or even unfavorable views of the West (Goodall, 2016).

In "Cruella," the character of Cruella de Vil offers a modern representation that both engages with and subverts traditional gender stereotypes. Historically, female villains in media, including earlier iterations of Cruella, have been portrayed in a way that emphasizes their



appearance, with traits like beauty and fashion being central to their identity (Zuckerman et al., 1980). The 2021 film challenges these stereotypes by giving depth to Cruella's character beyond her obsession with appearance. Estella's transformation into Cruella showcases not only the archetype of the "evil fashionista" but also delves into complex motivations of ambition, creativity, and rebellion against societal norms (Smith et al., 2013).

While the character initially aligns with common gendered villainous traits—such as using her fashion as a weapon—her progression as a character illustrates a move toward empowering her agency rather than reducing her to mere stereotypes of beauty or villainy. Cruella's journey highlights both the societal pressures she faces and the way she chooses to reclaim her identity through defiance, which distinguishes her from earlier, more one-dimensional portrayals of female antagonists (Baker & Raney, 2007).

The film "Cruella" delves into the prevalent issue of discrimination within the fashion business, especially her gender. The film depicts the objectification, marginalization, and inferior

treatment of women in the industry. Katie Walsh, a critic, argues that "Cruella" offers a critical perspective on the fashion industry's inherent sexism, which often marginalizes women and reduces them to mere objects of beauty. Because Disney has actively contributed to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, which has an impact on children's and teenagers' performance as well as their mental and physical health (10). (Sarah Coyne, Eric Rasmussen, David A Nelson, *Pretty as a Princess: Longitudinal Effects of Engagement With Disney Princesses on Gender Stereotypes, Body Esteem, and Prosocial Behavior in Children, Society in Research for Child Development*, June 2016). Young girls are negatively impacted by traditional Disney princess movies. A study including 198 pre-schoolers evaluated their level of interaction with Disney Princess culture and was published in *Child Development*. Coyne's study showed that girls, who interacted the most with Disney princesses, showed worse self-esteem about their bodies as time went on. Poor body image is a serious problem among young girls and can be a major precursor for developing an eating disorder later in life "Disney Princesses represent some of the first examples of exposure to the

thin ideal," (Coyne, 2016). According to Coyne's research, girls who connected with Disney princesses the most eventually displayed worse body esteem. Adolescent girls often struggle with poor body image, which can be a key risk factor for eating disorders in later life. Disney princess animated films frequently feature unrealistic and idealized depictions of female form and beauty, such as small waists, enormous breasts, wide eyes, and batting eyelashes. These images reflect a society that places a great emphasis on physical attractiveness. A lot of young girls identify with fairy-tale princesses because they are often praised for their extraordinary beauty, and they want to look like them (Bispo, 2015).

Cruella offers a distinctive and subtle portrayal of a contemporary female antagonist through the transformation of Estella into Cruella. This transformation is driven by pivotal moments in the film, showcasing her shift from an innocent, ambitious young woman into a ruthless and empowered figure.

For instance, early in the film, Estella struggles to fit into societal norms and suppresses her rebellious nature. In one scene, Estella faces constant humiliation in

her job as a cleaner at Liberty Department Store (timestamp: 00:18:00), illustrating her attempt to conform to societal expectations. However, her natural creativity shines through when she spontaneously redesigns a window display, which becomes her first act of defiance against the rigid system around her.

The transformation intensifies after she discovers the Baroness's role in her mother's death (timestamp: 00:51:00). This revelation marks a turning point for Estella, fuelling her desire for revenge and pushing her to embrace the persona of Cruella fully. One crucial scene is when Estella, now Cruella, crashes the Baroness's black-and-white party, arriving in a dazzling red dress, making a bold statement and publicly challenging the Baroness's dominance in the fashion world (timestamp: 01:08:00). This moment symbolizes her rejection of societal norms and her shift into a more confident, rebellious figure.

Cruella's evolving fashion choices also visually represent her transformation. Her initial modest outfits gradually give way to more daring, edgy, and rebellious designs, culminating in the dramatic fashion showdown scene where Cruella stages a public display

of her work by setting a dress on fire to reveal a striking new creation underneath (timestamp: 01:22:00). This act not only symbolizes her creative genius but also her willingness to embrace her darker side in her rivalry with the Baroness.

These moments illustrate how Estella's personal struggles and emotional pain contribute to her evolution into Cruella, blurring the lines between heroism and villainy. The character's complexity is further heightened as she navigates her relationships with Jasper and Horace, who question her more aggressive and vengeful behavior (timestamp: 01:30:00). Her journey portrays her as a multi-dimensional antagonist, one whose actions are driven by personal trauma and ambition, rather than pure malice.

The movie challenges conventional gender norms and expectations by presenting a sophisticated and diverse female antagonist who is not characterized solely by her interactions with males, but rather by her autonomy and aspirations, establishing people as 'different' is a selfish act to make oneself feel as if you are more included and have a place in society in comparison to those who do not because they are

unique and how is the representation of 'difference' linked with questions of 'power'.

### **Showing Obedience**

Initially, in the movie, audiences see Estella's male superior disregard her. Estella, subsequently adopting the name Cruella, is employed as a caretaker at the most stylish department store in London. Despite her aspiration to pursue a career as a fashion designer, she was offered a position as a caretaker at London Liberty. She requested her superior provide her with an opportunity to pursue a career as a fashion designer, but her superior displayed scepticism and disregarded her request.

The Boss: I gave you your job description. Don't go outside the boundaries of your engagement. Please.  
(Cruella, 2021, minute: 21.56.00)

The word "Please" signifies the desire of her supervisor for her to comply with his instructions by being submissive. Linda Pollock (1989) asserts that early modern England exhibited a distinct sociocultural framework. These included the concepts of hierarchy, social status, and gender. Individuals possessed both awareness of

their social position and comprehension of the anticipated attributes linked to being male or female, as well as the specific connotations associated with the phrases 'masculine' and 'feminine'. Men were required to occupy positions of leadership, utilizing their discernment and power, while women were expected to exhibit compliance, modesty, and submission.

Dyer (in (Hall, 1997, 258) Representation; Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices stated that,

We are always 'making sense' of things in terms of some wider categories. For example, on how we become to 'know' something about a person by thinking of the roles which he or she performs: is he/she a parent, a child, a worker, a lover, boss or an old age pensioner? We assign him/her to the membership of different groups, according to class, gender, age group, nationality, 'race', linguistic group, sexual preference and so on...

The remark above indicates that even during the early modern period, women were recognized for their adherence to male authority. This comment is consistent with Estella's firsthand experience residing in early modern England when

she was required to adhere to her employer's instructions and comply with their authority. It is no different from how females were treated in the early modern era of America where they were seen as incapable human beings and second citizens that have no rights.



Figure 5. The Boss is talking to Estella (Cruella, 2021, minute: 21.58.00)

Furthermore, the boss's facial expression indicates his assertiveness towards Estella as he raises his eyebrows. Inattentive to her presence, he diverts his attention to the object in his hand, disregarding Estella. In addition, the camera angle that tilts downward slightly effectively portrays the boss character's immense might, aligning with Kraft, R.N's (1987) finding that low angles imply strength, dynamic movement, and dominance. Hence, the boss utilizes his authority to attain his desired objectives, specifically, he seeks Estella's compliance.

### Domestic Worker

Estella tenaciously pursues her aspiration to become a fashion designer. Subsequently, she once again requests her boss for an opportunity to pursue a career as a fashion designer. In the following moments, she endeavors to persuade her superior:



Figure 6. The Boss asked Estella to clean the bathroom floor properly (Cruella, 2021, minute: 22.53.00)

Estella : Sir, I just wanted to say, I really am a dab a hand with the Needle.

The Boss : Why are you talking and not cleaning?

...

The Boss : Did you do all the bathrooms according to the regulations that I gave you? Soap, water, mop, bleach, polish?" In that order?

Estella : Yes

Estella suggests her skill in sewing and designing to her supervisor by claiming to be highly proficient with a needle. Instead of replying to Estella, he inquired, "Have you adhered to all the prescribed

regulations while cleaning the bathrooms?" Do you need soap, water, mop, bleach, or polish? The boss's response suggests that gender preconceptions are influencing this situation. Social roles dictate that a man must always be the family's leader and the primary provider of income, with women typically being viewed as housewives, nurturers, and caregivers. It also occurs in political contexts, when men are typically perceived as belonging to higher echelons of the national political system, while women are supposed to operate at the local level. Kan, Sullivan, and Gershuny (2011) asserted that conventional gender norms prescribe that family responsibilities are commonly perceived as 'feminine', with caregiving duties and ordinary household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry being closely linked to femininity.

In contrast, tasks that are not part of a regular pattern, such as do-it-yourself projects, outdoor work, and general upkeep, are commonly associated with the concept of 'masculinity'. Hence, individuals comply with these gender norms by carrying out domestic duties that correspond to their assigned gender roles. Cleaning is closely linked to

femininity, which is why women consistently identify it with cleaning. Moreover, the perpetual association of women with cleaning significantly influences society's perception of women. Estella is subject to disdain from her supervisor in this scenario.

### **Female are Less Intelligent**

Due to multiple rejections, Estella persists in her efforts to persuade her supervisor to grant her an opportunity as a fashion designer. She attempts to persuade her boss by asserting, "I am of the opinion that beneath the exterior of that rigid, ill-fitting suit, there resides a compassionate individual who desires to provide an exceptional young person with another opportunity." In addition, rather than affording her an opportunity, he displays rudeness towards her by instructing her to "thoroughly clean my office." "When you arrive tomorrow, please remember to bring a brain" (Cruella, 2021, minute: 25.20.00). Stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power that are usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group (Hall, 1997, p. 258).

It is evident that Estella's supervisor is displaying rudeness by using offensive

language against her, stating "when you come tomorrow, try, and remember to bring a brain." The behavior is inappropriate, although Estella is his subordinate. The supervisor perceives Estella as intellectually inferior due to her previous occupation as a caretaker. Expectations and chances in education are biased toward one gender over the other.

In the 1970s, gender stereotypes were widespread in the United States workplace, leading males to harbor conventional perceptions about women that influenced their behavior towards female coworkers. During this time, men perpetuated gender stereotypes against women in the workplace. Hentschel, T., Heilman, M. E., & Peus, C. V. (2019) found that women often faced limitations in their possibilities because men believed that women were less competent than men and should not be given equal opportunities for career progression. Estella's encounters conform to gender stereotypes, since her male superior viewed her, as a woman, to possess lesser competence compared to men.



Figure 7. The Boss is angry with Estella. (*Cruella*, 2021, minute: 25.20.00)

Moreover, her superior refused to provide her with chances for professional progression. Figure 3 reveals that the boss' facial expressions and actions demonstrate a lack of respect for Estella. For instance, the boss lifted his eyebrows while speaking to Estella, implying his superiority over her. Based on her boss's treatment, it is evident that he perceives females as less intellectual than men in a male-dominated workplace. This event exemplifies a scenario that could result in the rise of a dominant female figure, the prevailing gender stereotype, which portrays women as less clever than men, may compel women to mimic masculine traits to conform and succeed.

Stereotypes and the unequal power relations between gender and sexuality are perpetuated by images. As demonstrated by Goffman (1979), Hall et al. (2013), and De Lauretis (1984), gender representation matters, particularly when it comes to patterns. Put differently, discourses about gender and

sexuality are articulated by the repeated recurrence of representations in different media rather than by solitary pictures. The media is perceived as a platform for the ongoing debates on the meaning of many identities, such as gender or sexual orientation, age or sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, or any combination of these characteristics. Instead, gender and sexuality are concepts that emerge from our interactions with the world around us (West & Zimmerman, 1987) Gender and sexual identities are learned and performed within the constraints imposed by various societal components, including family, friends, schools, religious institutions, and media. From birth, individuals are subjected to expectations regarding gendered roles.

### **Unfeminine Representations and Acts of Madness**

Males were perceived as powerful, sensible, and in charge. The main cause of women adopting male energy to live in society—including as a character in a movie—is gender stereotypes. Female is frequently subjected to rigid demands from society regarding their duties, behavior, and looks. Females who do not conform to these standards risk being called "unfeminine" or

experiencing negative social consequences. One of the factors is that stigma from society can further isolate people with mental illnesses, making it harder for them to ask for assistance or be accepted. Because they defied gender standards, women have been labeled as "mad" for ages. Disparities like race and gender have also been crucial in shaping how lives with disabilities are portrayed. According to Garland-Thomson (1997), gendered and racialized perceptions of physically disabled female bodies led to the portrayal of women in American freak shows as "exotic and sexualized others". Gender is a major factor in the creation of a mad female's life in Cruella, especially when it comes to the inappropriate and unfeminine ways these ladies act out and represent being mentally ill women. When her friends confront Cruella about her cruelty, she finds it hard to admit the horrible, repulsive otherness that her methods of embodying and acting out mad womanhood have come to represent. She states that she is dead because of Cruella's lack of empathy. The idea that damaging interpersonal encounters have a terrible quality that awakens the hideous within all of humanity—a potentiality present in both the "other" and the self—is

clearly emphasized by this instance. Consequently, one could read Cruella's portrayal as partially relying on long-standing stereotypes that a woman who behaves erratically is mentally ill, a danger to others, and ought to be institutionalized. However, when a guy acts violently, it's more frequent for him to be portrayed as a "natural born killer," someone who is violent or awful by nature, and whose motivations do not need much thought. However, when a woman acts aggressively, it appears as though she has broken gender standards, and her transgression must be understood and explained.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the representation of female villains in media and movies has evolved to reflect a more nuanced and complex understanding of gender dynamics. Through the exploration of characters like those in Cruella, Female antagonists in film often subvert traditional norms and become symbols of empowerment and agency. However, the persistent presence of gender stereotypes highlights the need for continued critical analysis and advocacy for more diverse and authentic portrayals of women in media.



#### COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

Herewith the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and revision, and publication process in general.

#### REFERENCES

- Adi, I. R. (2016). *Fiksi Populer: Teori & Metode Kajian*. Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
- Ashley Bispo, *Fairytales Dreams: Disney Princesses' Effect on Young Girls' Self-Images*, 2015.
- Baker K, Raney AA. (2007). Equally super? Gender-role stereotyping of superheroes in children's animated programs. *Mass Commun. Soc.* 10:25-41
- Beverly, John, and Marc Zimmerman. (1990). "Literature, Ideology, and Hegemony." *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*, University of Texas Press, Austin, pp. 1 - 28.
- Charmaz, K. (2007). *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- Connell, R. W. (2005). *Masculinities*. University of California Press.
- Coyne SM, Linder JR, Rasmussen EE, Nelson DA, Collier KM. (2014). It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a gender stereotype! Longitudinal associations between superhero viewing and gender stereotyped play. *Sex Roles* 70:416-30
- Creswell, J.W. (2009). *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* 3rd ed, California: Sage. Print
- De Lauretis, T. (1984). *Alice doesn't. Feminism. Semiotics. Cinema*. Indiana University Press.
- Dyer, B. (2018). *The Representation of Female Characters in the Academy Award Winners for Best Picture of the Year*. Associate Dean University Honors College.
- Giannetti, Louis, (2011). *Understanding Movies*, 9 Edition. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender advertisements*. Harper and Row Publishers, Inc.
- Gross, B. (1994). *Bitch. Salmagundi*, (103), 146-156.
- Hall, S., Evans, J., & Nixon, S. (Ed.). (2013). *Representation* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Hall, Stuart. (1997). *Representation: Cultural Representations and*

- Signifying Practices.  
Scotland, Great Britain:  
Scotprint Ltd.
- Hentschel, T., Heilman, M. E.,  
& Peus, C. V. (2019). The  
Multiple Dimensions of  
Gender Stereotypes: A  
Current Look at Men's and  
Women's Characterizations  
of Others and Themselves.  
*Frontiers in Psychology*, 10,  
11.  
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00011>
- Kokoroski, Karin, (2012). "'I  
want more!': The Insatiable  
Villain in Children's  
Literature and Young Adult  
Fiction." *Villains and  
Heroes, or Villains as  
Heroes? : Essays on the  
Relationship between  
Villainy and Evil*, Inter-  
Disciplinary Press, Oxford,  
UK, pp. 25 - 38.
- Kraft, R.N. The influence of  
camera angle on  
comprehension and retention  
of pictorial events. *Memory  
& Cognition* 15, 291-307  
(1987).  
<https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03197032>
- Leaper C, Breed L, Hoffman L,  
Perlman CA. 2002. Variations  
in the gender  
stereotyped content of  
children's television  
cartoons across genres. *J.  
Appl. Soc. Psychol.*  
32:1653-62
- Mooney, D. (2021, June 4).  
Cruella de Vil Needs No  
Introduction, and Certainly  
No Explanation. *The  
Escapist*.  
<https://www.escapistmagazine.com/cruella-de-vil-needs-no-introduction-and-certainly-no-explanation/>
- Mulvey, L. (1975) 'Visual  
Pleasure and Narrative  
Cinema', *Screen*, 16(3), pp.  
6-18.  
[doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6](https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6).
- Pollock, L. (1989). 'Teach her  
to live under obedience':  
the making of women in the  
upper ranks of early modern  
England. *Continuity and  
Change*, 4, pp 231-258.  
[doi:10.1017/S0268416000003672](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0268416000003672)
- Rowe J. C. (2000). Post-  
nationalist american  
studies. University of  
California Press. Retrieved  
October 1, 2022, from  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520224384.001.001>.
- Smith SL, Choueiti M, Prescott  
A, Pieper KM. (2013). Gender  
roles and occupations: a  
look at character attributes  
and job-related aspirations  
in film and television.  
*Rep., Geena Davis Inst.  
Gend. Media*, Mount Saint  
Mary's Univ., Los Angeles,  
CA. [https://seejane.org/wp-  
content/uploads/key-](https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/key-)

findings-gender-roles-  
2013.pdf

Social Psychology Quarterly ,  
SEPTEMBER 2018, Vol. 81, No.  
3 (SEPTEMBER 2018), pp. 228-  
247.

Solomon, Charles. (1995), *The  
Disney That Never Was: The  
Stories and Art of Five  
Decades of Unproduced  
Animation*. Disney Editions.

Tajfel, Henri, and John Turner.  
1979. "An Integrative  
Theory of Intergroup  
Conflict." Pp. 33-47 in  
*The Social Psychology of  
Intergroup Relations*,  
edited by W. Austin and  
S. Worchel. Monterey:  
Brooks-Cole. Gamson,  
William. 1992. *Talking  
Politics*. New York:  
Cambridge University Press

Walsh A, Leaper C. (2020). A  
content analysis of gender  
representations in  
preschool children's  
television. *Mass Commun.  
Soc.* 23:331-55.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. H.  
(1987). Doing gender. *Gender  
& Society*, 1(2), 125-151.  
[https://doi.org/10.1177/089  
1243287001002002](https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002)