

Beyond the Wicked Sneer: Reconstruction of Children's Villain Archetypes in Contemporary Narratives

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By

RACHEL SARAH FERNANDES

22P0110040

ABC ID: 990202631890

PRN : 201907407

Under the Supervision of

DR. ANJALI CHAUBEY

Shenoi Goembab School of Languages and Literature
Discipline of English



GOA UNIVERSITY

Date: April 2024

Examined by:

Seal of the School

DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I hereby declare that the data presented in this Dissertation report entitled, “Beyond the Wicked Sneer: Reconstruction of Children's Villain Archetypes in Contemporary Narratives” is based on the results of investigations carried out by me in the Discipline of English at the Shenoj Goembab School of Languages and Literature, Goa University under the Supervision of Dr. Anjali Chaubey and the same have not been submitted elsewhere for the award of a degree or diploma by me. Further, I understand that Goa University or its authorities will not be responsible for the correctness of observations / experimental or other findings given the dissertation.

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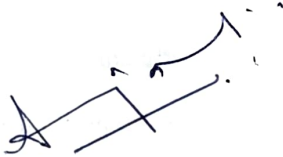
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Dr. Anjali Chaubey

Supervising Teacher

Date: 16th April 2024



Signature of Dean of the School/HoD of Dept

Date: 16th April 2024

Place: Goa University



School / Dept Stamp

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the reconstruction of children's villain archetypes in contemporary narratives, exploring how these multifaceted portrayals of antagonists impact young readers. Employing textual analysis of selected works like *Maleficent* and *Cruella*, the research examines the factors contributing to the psychological appeal of these villains, including the exploration of complex motivations and backstories that foster relatability and emotional connection. Further analysis observes the concept of moral ambiguity within these narratives, examining the blurring of lines between good and evil through ethical dilemmas, societal expectations, and prejudice. The evolving role of redemption in contemporary fairy tales is also explored, focusing on the potential for character transformation driven by internal conflicts and external influences. Finally, the research considers the educational implications of exposing young readers to morally complex villains, highlighting how these reconstructed archetypes can foster critical thinking, empathy, and the potential for growth. Ultimately, this research argues that contemporary narratives offer a richer exploration of good and evil, promoting a deeper understanding of human nature to young readers.

KEYWORDS: Children's literature, reconstructed villains, moral ambiguity, redemption.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the magical world of children's literature, the portrayal of heroes and villains have long served as the heart of storytelling. The narratives with their whimsical and captivating elements, shape young readers' perceptions of morality, empathy, and the complexities of the human experience. From the wicked stepmothers and evil witches of classic fairy tales to the sinister sorcerers and twisted deities of contemporary fantasy novels, villains have played a crucial role in propelling narratives forward, challenging the "good guy" protagonists, and conveying timeless lessons about good and evil. The portrayal of villains in children's literature has undergone a remarkable transformation over the course of time, and this shift in storytelling conventions is attributed in reflection to the evolving societal and cultural norms.

No longer confined to one-dimensional figures of pure wickedness, contemporary villains are complex characters with rich backstories, comprehensive motivations, and moral ambiguities. This research explores the evolving nature of children's literature villains, examining how contemporary narratives challenge traditional archetypes, probe into the psychology of villainy, and offer compelling redemption arcs. By analysing selected texts spanning classic fairy tales to modern retellings, this study aims to illuminate the significance of villains in shaping young readers' moral development, fostering empathy, and promoting critical thinking skills in an ever-changing literary landscape.

In the realm of children's literature, the hero and the villain have long been the cornerstones of storytelling, shaping the narrative and guiding the reader through a world of adventure and intrigue. The hero, with their noble and heroic characteristics, stands in stark contrast to the villain, with their crooked and blackguardly traits. These distinctions serve as the foundation for the development of the characters, allowing readers to judge them based on the labels and categories society has established. As society evolves and technology

advances, the portrayal of heroes and villains in children's literature has undergone significant changes, reflecting the shifting values and perspectives of the time.

While this era is marked by a plethora of digital stimuli, children's literature still remains as a predominant form of storytelling. This study acknowledges that the narratives children and young readers encounter play a vital role in shaping their understanding of the world and their values. Therefore, understanding the nuanced workings of villainous characters in contemporary children's narratives is essential. This study focuses on the evolving nature of children's literature, reflecting the shift in cultural and societal values over time. The portrayal of villains in these narrative cultures is critical for parents and educators seeking to navigate the complex intersection of contemporary culture and integrate them in literature, culture, and child development. Contemporary retelling of children's literature villains also demonstrates the importance of addressing potential victimization of villains and how these narratives rectify or adjust past inequities, and thereby contributing to a more ethical treatment of characters. The research also aims to explore the psychology behind the rising popularity of villainous characters and the impact this preference may have on readers as a whole. This appeal will also aid in acquiring a better understanding of the changing notions of right and wrong, and how readers are encouraged to explore the complexities behind moral and ethical decision making. It is crucial to analyse these messages, as children's literature often serves as a foundation for moral development in young readers.

The study explores the world of literature, media, ethical studies, and psychology. The primary focus of this study will be literary scrutiny of four selected texts: *Maleficent* (Novelisation) by Elizabeth Rudnick (2014), Disney's Live Action of *Cruella* (Novelisation) by Elizabeth Rudnick (2021), *Cold Hearted: A Tale of the Wicked Stepmother* by Serena Valentino (2023), and *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch* by Serena Valentino (2018). This study aims to explore and analyse the evolving portrayal of villains in

contemporary children's literature and the profound impact this evolution has on young readers and society as a whole. One major aspect of the study's scope is the exploration of the psychological appeal of villains in contemporary children's literature. This involves an in depth analysis of the traditionally "plain" evil characters now being portrayed with more complexities to their lives and personalities, and thus highlighting the concept of "Good within Evil". This concept has led to a significant rise in popularity of villainous characters due to the relatability and fascination with these complexly portrayed characters. Additionally, this aforementioned question is linked to moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas presented in these modern narratives. The study examines how these stories challenge traditional notions of good versus evil, thereby fostering a more nuanced comprehension of morality and ethical understanding among readers, especially younger readers, while also emphasising the possibility of redemption and forgiveness.

As society progresses further everyday, children's literature will continue to grow and develop as it often reflects the values and concerns of the society in which it is produced. Understanding how villains are portrayed in modern narratives is crucial as changes reflect contemporary values and societal shifts. A few words have an extraordinary way of transforming the entire perspective of a story. Depending on how often a particular version is retold, it may become the one engraved in memories. Childhood stories that individuals have grown up with hold a unique beauty and enduring charm. Even if the popularly known Disney adaptation remains a timeless favourite, there's a tingling curiosity and excitement that arises when encountering a fresh perspective or a new retelling of a beloved tale. As the saying goes, "as flat as a pancake may be, it still has two sides". This illustrates the multifaceted nature of narratives and how different interpretations can offer varying viewpoints, deepening our understanding of these stories.

Since classic children's stories tend to focus on the main characters' good qualities being rewarded throughout the hardships thrown at them, antagonist characters are typically portrayed as one-dimensional figures with a single objective: to wreak havoc and destroy the main character's dreams. The study of psychological appeal, redemption arcs, and moral ambiguity in the reconstructed children's villains literature is relevant for understanding how narratives can be layered and complex. This study will primarily focus on literary scrutiny of the selected texts, but will also employ an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating elements of psychology, and ethics with literary analysis. And thereby, fostering a more holistic understanding of the nuances in contemporary storytelling. In an era where 'Cancel Culture' is on the rise, its toxic nature often involves the widespread targeting and defamation of individuals. It can lead to a sense of victimisation and the portrayal of these individuals as villains, even without a complete understanding of the full context or both sides of the story. This tendency of mass-cancelling is relevant to society within the scope of this study, as it reflects the shift in how individuals, including fictional villains, are perceived and treated. The cancel culture events highlights the need for a more nuanced and empathetic approach to understanding complex character portrayals, moral ambiguity, and the potential for redemption in narratives, both in literature and in real-life situations.

Presenting young readers with retellings of their childhood villains can aid in developing moral and ethical reflection by challenging the traditional notions of good versus evil and build soft skills such as critical thinking and empathy skills. Analysing the redemption arcs created for villains showcase how these narratives teach important life lessons about forgiveness, transformation, the human capacity for change, resilience and how the ability to take responsibility for one's own actions and mistakes can lead to better outcomes. In a world that is more often seen in shades of grey rather than an unmixed black and white, providing a more complex portrayal of characters can influence parents, educators,

and society at large to use these reconstructed narratives as means to broaden children's perspective of society. It encourages them to question, reflect, and appreciate the multifaceted nature of the human experience. In a society where the traditional notions of classic stories have held strong influence, this study contributes by highlighting the transformative power of literature and storytelling. Additionally, it highlights the potential literature has in shaping the moral, critical, and emotional development of children. Thus, making this study highly relevant to the field.

1.1: AIM AND OBJECTIVES:

Aim

The multifaceted portrayal of reconstructed villains in contemporary children's narratives challenge traditional notions of morality that encourages moral reflection and promotes critical thinking and empathy skills among readers.

Objectives

1. To examine the evolving portrayal of children's villains in contemporary literature and media.
2. To analyse the psychological appeal of reconstructed children's literature villains.
3. To explore the purpose of redemption arcs for children's literature villains and its effect in aiding to character complexity.
4. To observe how contemporary narratives portraying children's literature villains challenge the traditional concept of morality.

1.2: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF VILLAIN ARCHETYPES:

The historical perspective of children's literature villain archetypes provides an intriguing glimpse into the evolution of storytelling and the ever changing societal values over time. From ancient myths, legends, and folklore to contemporary narratives, villains have served as essential elements of moral guidance, cultural and societal reflection, and entertainment. The earliest form of storytelling can be attributed to Ancient myths and folklore passed on from generations to generations by oral tradition. These stories often featured villains embodying primal fears such as death or darkness, natural disasters - phenomena such as earthquakes or floods that cannot be controlled by human beings, or moral misdeeds such as stealing, destroying, and deception. These early narratives, such as the Greek myths of Medusa or the Norse tales of Loki, reflected the cultural anxieties and moral codes of their respective societies. Villains were often depicted as supernatural beings or divine adversaries, serving as cautionary tales or catalysts for heroism and moral growth.

1. Middle Ages and the Renaissance:

During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, villain archetypes in children's literature became intertwined with religious allegory and moral instruction. Characters like the wicked stepmother in fairy tales or the devil in allegorical stories symbolised moral corruption and the consequences of sinful behaviour. Villains served as moral foils to virtuous protagonists, reinforcing societal norms and religious teachings while entertaining and captivating young audiences with tales of virtue triumphing over evil.

2. 18th and 19th Centuries:

The rise of children's literature during the 18th and 19th centuries witnessed the popularisation of fairy tales and folk stories collected and retold by authors like *Snow White*

and the Seven Dwarfs and *Little Red Riding Hood* by the Brothers Grimm and *Thumbelina* and *The Princess and the Pea* by Hans Christian Andersen. Villains in these tales often represented societal fears and anxieties, such as poverty, jealousy, or the abuse of power. The archetypal villains, such as the wicked witch or the cruel stepmother, became enduring symbols in children's literature, captivating generations of readers with their sinister schemes and eventual downfall.

3. 20th Century:

In the 20th century, the portrayal of villains in children's literature underwent significant transformation, reflecting the changing social and cultural perspectives. Authors began to challenge traditional villain archetypes, imbuing characters with greater depth, complexity, and moral ambiguity. Villains became more nuanced and relatable, with motives and backstories that invited empathy and understanding from readers.

4. Contemporary Era:

Contemporary children's literature continues to push the boundaries of villain archetypes, exploring themes of redemption, empathy, and moral ambiguity. Contemporary narratives have created villains that defy traditional stereotypes, blurring the lines between good and evil and challenging readers to question their assumptions and preconceptions. For example, in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, Severus Snape was initially presented as a cruel and antagonistic figure, Snape's backstory ultimately reveals his love for Harry's mother, which motivates him to protect Harry throughout the series. In Tim Burton's 2005 film *Corpse Bride*, the "Corpse Bride", Emily, is portrayed as a misunderstood villain. The film evokes sympathy for Emily's tragic backstory and the pain of her abandonment. The audience is encouraged to understand her motivations rather than simply view her as a

monstrous villain. Many villains in the *Marvel Comics* have complex motivations and backstories that go beyond simple greed or world domination. Characters like Loki, Magneto, and Thanos all have compelling reasons for their actions, forcing readers to question traditional notions of good and evil. This complex portrayal challenges the notion of a one-dimensional villain and explores themes of redemption and sacrifice.

The historical perspective of children's literature villain archetypes offers insight into the evolving nature of storytelling and the enduring appeal of characters who embody the darker aspects of human nature. From ancient myths to modern-day narratives, villains have played a pivotal role in shaping children's literary experiences, reflecting cultural values, societal anxieties, and the timeless struggle between light and darkness.

1.2.1: Evolution of Villains:

The evolution of villain archetypes in children's literature mirrors the broader cultural and societal shifts, offering readers a glimpse into the complexities of human nature and the enduring struggle between the good and the bad.

1. Complexity and Depth:

In traditional children's literature, villains were often portrayed as one-dimensional characters with simplistic motivations and evil intentions. Over time, these narratives shifted towards more complex and nuanced portrayals of villains, with authors detailing their backstories, motivations, and psychological depths. Contemporary children's literature often features villains with multifaceted personalities, moral ambiguities, and internal conflicts, making them more relatable and compelling to readers.

2. Empathy and Understanding:

Traditional villains were often depicted as purely malevolent figures, devoid of redeeming qualities or sympathetic traits. Contemporary children's literature has embraced the idea of empathy for villains, exploring their humanity, vulnerabilities, and potential for redemption. Authors tend to strive to evoke empathy from readers by highlighting the factors that contribute to a character's villainous behaviour, such as past trauma, societal pressures, or personal struggles.

3. Subversion of Tropes:

Classic children's literature often relied on archetypal villain tropes, such as the wicked stepmother, the evil witch, or the tyrannical ruler. However, in recent years, narratives have been leaning towards subverting these traditional tropes, with authors challenging stereotypes and offering fresh interpretations of villainous characters. Villains may now defy gender norms, cultural expectations, or genre conventions, providing readers with new perspectives and narrative possibilities.

4. Redemption and Complexity:

While redemption arcs for villains have always existed in literature, they have become more prevalent and nuanced in contemporary children's literature. Authors increasingly explore themes of forgiveness, transformation, and moral growth for their villains, allowing readers to witness the complexities of the human experience. Villains are no longer relegated to the role of irredeemable evildoers but are instead presented as flawed individuals capable of change and redemption. This humanised portrayal of villains makes them more relatable to readers than protagonists who never commit wrongs.

5. Cultural and Social Commentary:

Villains in children's literature often reflect broader cultural and societal issues, serving as allegorical characters or symbols of societal fears. Contemporary villains may embody contemporary concerns such as environmental destruction, political corruption, or social injustice, providing readers with opportunities to engage with pressing issues in a fictional context.

The evolution of children's literature villains reflects a broader shift towards more nuanced, empathetic, and socially conscious storytelling. By embracing complexity, empathy, and cultural relevance, contemporary children's literature offers readers a richer and more diverse array of villainous characters to explore and understand.

1.2.2: Classic Villain Archetypes and Characteristics:

Classic children's literature villains often embody archetypal traits that evoke fear, challenge protagonists, and teach moral lessons.

1. The Wicked Stepmother:

Stepmothers in fairy tales are characterised by jealousy, cruelty, and a desire for power or status. They are often portrayed as a manipulative figure who mistreats the protagonist, often the stepdaughter. The stepmother's character acts as foil to the biological mother who cannot be replaced. Example: *Cinderella* and *Rapunzel*.

2. The Evil Witch:

Often depicted as a magical, wicked figure with supernatural powers. Uses potions, spells, and curses to enact harm or control over others. Portray the vices of temptation, greed,

and uncontrolled ambition. For example: The Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

3. The Scheming Trickster:

A machiavellian character that often outwits protagonists through clever schemes and false promises. These characters portray the importance of honesty and sincerity in prevailing against challenges, as seen in characters like the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*.

4. The Mysterious Beast:

Portrayed as fearsome externally, however often misunderstood. These characters often receive a transformation or redemption arc throughout the story. Symbolises the transformative power and duality of human nature, the power of forgiveness, and the possibility of redemption, as seen in characters like the Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*.

5. The Ruthless Ruler:

Rulers with an imposing oppressive hand and greed for more power. These characters represent tyranny and the abuse of power over the weak. They are brought to justice by heroes who fight for the betterment of others, for example: Scar in *The Lion King* or Jafar in *Aladdin*.

These classic children's literature villain archetypes transcend time and culture, captivating audiences with their vivid personalities, moral complexities, and timeless lessons about the human condition.

1.3: LITERATURE REVIEW:

The research paper by Jessica E. Black, titled *Who can resist a villain? Morality, Machiavellianism, imaginative resistance, and liking for dark fictional characters*, which was published in 2018 in the journal *Science Direct*, Poetics, Vol. 74, aims to investigate the connection between individuals' preferences for dark fictional characters, such as villains or morally complex protagonists, and various personal characteristics, specifically Machiavellianism and imaginative resistance (the reluctance to engage imaginatively with immoral fictional content). The study acknowledges that, according to Affective Disposition Theory proposed by Zillman and Cantor in 1976, people tend to care about the fate of fictional characters they like. Their enjoyment increases when these favoured characters succeed and disliked ones fail. This preference is influenced by individuals' moral considerations, as it is the most significant factor in character liking and subsequent enjoyment, as suggested by Raney in 2011.

Furthermore, the study defines identification with fictional characters as understanding their perspective, empathising with their situations, or perceiving similarities between them and the audience. This concept, as described by Cohen in 2001, involves an emotional and cognitive process that allows viewers or readers to experience the fictional world from the character's viewpoint, including their self-perception, motives, social interactions, and emotions. Bandura, in 2001, also highlights the resemblance between media figures and real individuals and how social cognitive theory applies to both. People tend to model their behaviour after media figures, even when those figures are fictional, and learn vicariously from them. This attraction to fictional characters as role models persists even when their behaviour is morally questionable because individuals are more motivated by positive outcomes.

In an article titled, *Why People Are Drawn To Fictional Villains* published in the *Science Connected Magazine* in 2023, Jocelyn Solis-Moreira explains that in a study, conducted by researchers on personality quizzes that featured both fictional villains (like Maleficent) and non-villains (such as Sherlock Holmes), they discovered that individuals tended to prefer characters with personality traits similar to their own. People with traits resembling non-villains were more likely to become fans of those characters, while those who shared personality traits with villains found the villains more likeable.

Additionally, in the research project, *Villains, Morality, and Redemption: A Content Analysis of Children's Movies*, by Iqra Ishaq published as part of a senior Honors Program, attempts to demonstrate the impact of children's media on the social and moral development of children is significant. The way in which children's movies portray villains and the criminal justice system can shape children's attitudes towards offenders and those involved in the criminal justice system. Additionally, the study analyses how the redemption, offering of reparations, or forgiveness of villains by the protagonists is scrutinised for the implications it carries regarding rehabilitation, restorative justice, and forgiveness.

In the online, peer reviewed, refereed, and quarterly journal, *Bodhi*, the research paper *An Ode to Morality - Hidden Pearls of Wisdom as Seen in the Selected Tales of Grimm's Children and the Household Tales*, Subhiktcha and Sindhu (2021) argue that traditional fairy tales, with their clear distinctions between good and evil characters, play a vital role in early childhood development. These tales introduce children to core moral values like kindness, patience, humility, and courage (moral compass). However, the authors acknowledge limitations in this binary approach. Real-life human behavior is more nuanced, with individuals possessing a spectrum of positive and negative traits. It's the relative strength of these characteristics that ultimately shapes a person's actions. This suggests that fairy tales,

while valuable for introducing basic moral concepts, might benefit from a more complex portrayal of characters to better reflect the complexities of human nature.

Published in the same literary journal, *Children's Literature as an Important Tool for Education* by M. Sangeeta and Dr. C. Poorna Push Kala (2021) argue that children's literature is a well-established genre that plays a crucial role in educating both children and adults. It serves as a bridge between generations by transmitting traditional values and fostering awareness in young minds. The authors suggest that children's literature can be a vehicle for adults to express unfulfilled desires and dreams, cultivating these aspirations in the "budding talents" of a nation.

In the year 2015 as part of the Master's Program in Fine Arts of Antioch University, Arielle A. Silver published *Wicked, Selfish, and Cruel: An Inquiry into the Stepmother Narrative*. The study attempts to highlight the deeply ingrained perceptions of stepmothers that fairytales have created. The study states that in popular culture, the character of the stepmother is often portrayed as wicked, selfish, and cruel, taking on a monstrous and abusive persona. She also notes that regardless of the translation, the cruel stepmother is consistently depicted in opposition to the loving and benevolent biological mother who, despite her unfortunate demise, continues to hold unwavering affection for her child.

Stepmothers in *The Grimm's Fairy Tales* are often memorable villains; that even among ogres, evil cooks, and cruel mothers-in-law, the term 'stepmother' carries a strong implication of wickedness, and the phrase 'wicked stepmother' is almost redundant in its association with villainy. It is also important to note that in Maria Tatar's book *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales: Expanded Edition* she states, "Enshrining the stepmother as villain brings with it the added advantage of exonerating both biological parents from blame for the miserable conditions at home" (Tatar 155) Thus implying that the 'evil

stepmother' is an exaggerated character created for plot progress and as a foil to the biological mother.

1.4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The method of study applied in this dissertation is a close reading of the texts and conducting an in-depth textual analysis of the retellings of selected children's villains in literature to demonstrate the need and purpose of creating multifaceted antagonists, which will develop critical thinking skills and empathy skills in young readers. The selected texts include: *Maleficent* (Novelisation) by Elizabeth Rudnick, Disney Live Action of *Cruella* (Novelisation), *Cold Hearted: A Tale of the Wicked Stepmother* by Serena Valentino, and *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch* by Serena Valentino.

The study comprises five chapters. Chapter One consists of the aims and objectives of the study, followed by significance of the topic, information on the historical perspective of villain archetypes and the evolution of villains, literature review, and methodology. Chapter Two is an analysis of the psychological appeal of villains in contemporary times and the factors that contribute to it. This chapter will also explore the complexities and motivations behind the villains' actions and behaviour. Chapter Three is an analysis of moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas presented in contemporary times. The chapter will begin with an introduction to moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas, followed by an analysis of the concept of good versus evil with reference to the selected texts. And finally the educational implications this chapter provides. Chapter Four is dedicated to analyse to what extent do redemption arcs in contemporary children's narratives challenge traditional villain archetypes and address potential victimisation of villains? Additionally, this chapter will explore the educational and moral significance redemption arcs have for villains. Chapter Five is the final and concluding chapter, followed by the bibliography of the study.

1.5: RESEARCH DESIGN:

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Sets the stage for the research by outlining the aims and objectives. The research consists on a qualitative research, focusing on textual analysis of four selected texts: *Maleficent* (2014), the novelization of Disney's live-action *Cruella* by Elizabeth Rudnick and Dodie Smith (2021), *Cold Hearted* by Serena Valentino (2023), and *Mother Knows Best* by Serena Valentino (2018). This chapter will also examine the historical perspective of children's literature villains, villain archetypes characteristics, as well as the evolution of these antagonistic figures over time.

CHAPTER 2: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ALLURE OF VILLAINY

Analyses the factors that contribute to the psychological appeal of reconstructed villains in contemporary narratives. Methodology employed involved is a close reading of character descriptions, dialogue, and actions within the selected texts to identify and analyse these factors.

CHAPTER 3: THE BLURRY LINE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

Examines the concept of moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas presented in contemporary narratives featuring reconstructed villains. This chapter involves close textual analysis of specific scenes and situations where moral ambiguity arises. Exploration on how the narrative portrays the motivations and actions of villains, highlighting the lack of clear-cut good versus evil.

CHAPTER 4: REDEMPTION FOR EVEN FAIRY TALES' MOST HATED?

Explores the evolving role of redemption arcs for villains in contemporary narratives and how these arcs challenge traditional villain archetypes. This chapter employs close textual analysis of the redemption arcs in the selected texts. Identifying key turning points, internal conflicts, and external influences that contribute to the villain's potential for change. And finally comparing and contrasting the redemption opportunities across different narratives.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Summarises the key findings from your research, emphasising how reconstructed villains challenge traditional notions of morality and promote critical thinking in young readers. Also highlights limitations observed during the research process.

WORKS CITED

APPENDICES

Brief synopsis of the four selected texts.

1.6: LIMITATIONS:

- The analysis is limited to selected texts, therefore findings of the research paper may not be applicable to all contemporary children's literature featuring villain archetypes.
- Interdisciplinary analysis (literary analysis, psychological approach, ethical studies) of the study may not be fully explored due to depth and complexity of each discipline.

1.7: RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. To analyse the factors that contribute to the psychological appeal of villains in contemporary children's narratives.
2. To examine how contemporary children's narratives explore moral ambiguity and portray ethical dilemmas.
3. To explore to what extent do redemption arcs in contemporary children's narratives challenge traditional villain archetypes and address potential victimization of villains?

1.8: HYPOTHESIS:

The multifaceted portrayal of reconstructed villains in contemporary children's narratives challenge traditional notions of morality, which encourages moral reflection and promotes critical thinking and empathy skills among readers.

CHAPTER 2: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ALLURE OF VILLAINY

In exploring the intricate dynamics of villainy within contemporary narratives, it becomes evident that the allure of these antagonistic figures extends far beyond their diabolical deeds. Villains often captivate readers with their complex personalities, morally ambiguous motivations, and compelling narratives. This chapter works towards exploring the psychological motives that contribute to the enduring fascination with villainous characters. Throughout history, villains have held a perennial fascination, serving as both foils and mirrors to societal fears and individual struggles. From the cunning machinations of literary figures like Professor Moriarty from *Sherlock Holmes* to the over-the-top personas of iconic cinematic villains like The Joker from the *Batman* franchise, these characters have transcended their roles as mere antagonists to become symbols of psychological complexity and moral ambiguity.

At the heart of the allure lies a contradictory blend of repulsion and attraction, as audiences are simultaneously repelled by the villain's malevolent actions yet drawn to their charisma, intelligence, and mysterious nature. Villains often embody qualities that challenge conventional notions of heroism, offering a glimpse into the darker regions of the human psyche and prompting introspection into the nature of good and evil. By deconstructing the factors that shape our perception of villains, including the exploration of their complexities and motivations, the establishment of relatability and emotional connection, and the influence of broader cultural and societal contexts, the profound impact of these characters on readers of all ages can be studied. Through a nuanced analysis of primary texts, including the novelization of *Maleficent* by Elizabeth Rudnick, Disney's live-action *Cruella*, *Mother Knows: A Tale of the Old Witch* by Serena Valentino, and *Cold Hearted* by Serena Valentino,

the diverse dimensions of villainous allure in contemporary storytelling is explored. By diving deep into these narratives, a better understanding reveals the underlying psychological forces that compel readers to empathise with, sympathise with, and even root for characters who, on the surface, represent everything one should fear and despise.

2.1: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PSYCHOLOGICAL APPEAL:

The allure of villains lies not only in their dastardly deeds but also in the complexities that lie beneath their malevolent exteriors. One key factor contributing to their psychological appeal is the exploration of their motivations and inner workings. Reimagined villains are portrayed as multidimensional characters with intricate backstories and nuanced motivations that defy simplistic categorisation. Whether driven by revenge, ambition, or a twisted sense of justice, these characters possess a depth and complexity that intrigue audiences and invite further examination. In *Maleficent*, "She had been betrayed. That Stefan had taken her wings. That he had lied. Stolen her heart and her wings." (Rudnick 67) The titular character was bitterly betrayed by a man she loved, a human she believed to be good, which caused her immense pain and fueled her desire for revenge against Stefan and the humans. Her experience of betrayal and emotional breakdown resonates with the audience, eliciting sympathy and understanding.

Similarly, in the novelization of live-action adaptation of Disney's *Cruella*, "She had spent so much time trying to prove herself to the Baroness. She had put all her hopes and dreams into working for the woman." (Rudnick 67) The protagonist grapples with complex emotions upon discovering the dark truth about the Baroness, whom she admired as an icon but who also played a role in her mother's death. The portrayal of ambitious and abusive female characters, traditionally relegated to the role of the "wicked stepmother" archetype in fairy tales, adds another layer of complexity. Characters like Mother Gothel (Rapunzel's

stepmother) and Lady Tremaine (Cinderella's stepmother) make difficult choices driven by their aspirations. These choices, often portrayed as purely selfish within the traditional fairytale narratives, are presented with greater nuance in contemporary retellings. This allows the readers to see them not just as villains but as individuals grappling with their circumstances. Furthermore, the establishment of relatability and emotional connection plays a crucial role in provoking empathy and fascination towards villains.

While fairy tale protagonists exemplify goodness despite adversity to encourage children to cultivate kindness and forgiveness, human beings are inherently complex and incapable of being entirely good or bad. This complexity renders fairy tale protagonists less relatable. How can one truly identify with a character who effortlessly forgives a loved one's betrayal, as opposed to Maleficent who seeks retribution for a similar transgression? Mother Gothel, despite her villainous intent, offers a touch of relatable self-interest. Her dependence on the magical flower for youth can be humorously viewed as an unwillingness to return a borrowed treasure. This selfish clinging to a benefit, even if unearned, resonates with the human tendency to prioritise personal gain. While not excusing her actions, this perspective adds a layer of complexity. This warped sense of justice fuels the actions of many fairy tale villains. They see themselves as the wronged party, seeking to right a perceived imbalance. Maleficent's curse is a response to a jealous king's actions. Cruella, consumed by resentment and guilt for idolising the Baroness who killed her mother, plots to eliminate her by upstaging and taking the Baroness's place in the fashion industry. These characters' lives were irrevocably altered by the injustices inflicted upon them. Their descent into villainy becomes a twisted quest for revenge, a warped sense of getting what they believe they deserve. Their motivations, though misguided, resonate with our understanding of human emotions like anger and a desire for retribution. Despite their deplorable actions, villains are depicted as flawed individuals with humanising qualities that resonate with readers on a deeper level.

Whether it's their tragic pasts, moral ambiguity, or vulnerabilities, these elements serve to humanise villains and blur the lines between hero and antagonist.

2.1.1: Exploration of Complexities and Motivations:

In the examination of the psychological allure of villainy, an intriguing focal point emerges in the exploration of the complexities and motivations that propel these antagonistic characters. Villains transcend simplistic portrayals as mere embodiments of malevolence, instead embodying multifaceted layers of personality, backstory, and motivation. Understanding the intricacies of these characters compels a deep dive into their inner workings, deciphering the intricate interplay of emotions, desires, and experiences that stimulate their actions.

This chapter seeks to investigate the complexities and motivations inherent in villains within contemporary narratives, aiming to illuminate the psychological underpinnings that drive their behaviour and challenge conventional moral frameworks. Through close analysis of primary texts, this study will explore how these characters are crafted to embody a diverse array of motivations, ranging from tragic pasts to twisted aspirations. By unravelling the intricacies of villainy, one can obtain a better insight into the human condition and the complex interplay between light and darkness within individuals.

1. Sympathetic Backstories:

One effective method for villains to capture audience attention is through the presentation of sympathetic backstories. By revealing characters' past traumas, injustices, or societal pressures, narratives foster an understanding of the motivations behind seemingly evil actions. This comprehension can, in turn, evoke empathy and even admiration for the villain's resilience or strength in the face of adversity.. "...all of a woman's possessions

become property of her husband upon marriage." (Valentino 42). Cinderella's stepmother, Lady Tremaine, exemplifies this phenomenon. As folk tales date back centuries, the fairy tale of *Cinderella* lacks a specific historical setting due to numerous adaptations. The 1950 Disney film draws elements from Charles Perrault's version, who is often associated with a French aristocratic setting. The architecture, clothing, and overall style suggest a vaguely 17th century Europe, a period when women relinquished a significant degree of control over their possessions upon marriage. "Sir Richard had been penniless and in desperate need to marry a lady of means to keep his estate." (Valentino loc. 1439). A closer examination of Lady Tremaine's backstory, as presented in the prequel novel (Valentino), reveals a more nuanced picture. Sir Richard, Cinderella's biological father, is portrayed as doting to Cinderella alone, suggesting his heart wouldn't readily accept another (Valentino Loc. 1439). This undermines the legitimacy of Lady Tremaine's marriage, which appears to have been built on false promises of a better life for herself and her daughters (Valentino Loc. 726).

Additionally, the novel suggests Lady Tremaine found herself trapped in a foreign land, disrespected and disregarded by her new husband, with no servants to ease the burden of domestic chores. "Lady Tremaine's fortune had been returned to her upon his death..." (Valentino Loc. 1725). In the 1950 film *Cinderella*, portrays Lady Tremaine as spoiling her daughters, the act of a mother using her own funds can hardly be construed as squandering wealth? Following Sir Richard's death, Lady Tremaine regained her autonomy, but the bitterness from the marriage lingered. This residual resentment may explain her targeting of Cinderella, whom she perceived as a symbol of her past misery as "Lady Tremaine felt a sense of power in making Cinderella pay for everything she had done to make her life miserable" (Valentino Loc. 1752). This analysis demonstrates how Lady Tremaine's backstory complicates her villainous portrayal. By acknowledging the societal pressures and

personal betrayals she endured, the audience can develop a sense of empathy for her character, even as they disapprove of her actions towards Cinderella.

Serena Valentino's novel, *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch*, offers a nuanced backstory for the character of Mother Gothel, a well-known villain. Unlike the typical villain with a singular traumatic event, Gothel's childhood is steeped in darkness. The narrative depicts the tragic loss of her two sisters at the hands of their own mother, Manea, who possesses the legendary golden flower with the power to grant youth. Unable to reconcile with this devastating loss, Gothel embarks on a relentless quest to find a way to revive her deceased sisters. Valentino establishes the pursuit of eternal youth as a complex and arduous endeavour. Gothel's obsession with the magical flower, later revealed to be named Rapunzel, stems from her unwavering desire to achieve a goal far beyond mere vanity. However, when the last remaining flower is used to save a dying queen, Gothel resorts to a desperate act. She kidnaps the baby born imbued with the flower's magic and confines her within a secluded tower, raising the child as her own.

While Disney's 2010 film, *Tangled*, portrays Mother Gothel's motivation as solely fueled by a desire to retain her youthful beauty, Valentino's reimagining offers a deeper perspective. This prequel reveals a far more potent driving force: the profound yearning to bring back loved ones, a sentiment with which many readers can likely identify. The kidnapped child becomes a vessel for the magic Gothel seeks, leading her to raise the child while simultaneously pursuing her research. It is important to note that this context, while providing a more sympathetic portrayal, does not absolve Gothel of her kidnapping act.

"Cruella De Vil wasn't born. She was made." (Rudnick 5). Cruella de Vil, the iconic antagonist from Disney's classic 1961 film *101 Dalmatians*, has captivated audiences for decades. However, her original portrayal in the 1960s film presents a shallow villainy, driven by a seemingly superficial obsession with fur coats made from Dalmatian puppies

(Reitherman, et al.). This revisioned prequel, *Cruella* (2021), probes deeper, exploring the factors that contribute to Estella's (Cruella's pre-transformation persona) descent into villainy. The narrative establishes a stark contrast between Estella's artistic aspirations and the societal pressures she faces. Estella, described as a curious child though with a bit of a mean streak but, "She didn't want to be cruel. She just wanted to sew." (Rudnick 6) While her mother encourages self-expression: "You can be anybody or anything you want, sweet girl," her mum said. "You aren't just black or white. You're every color of the rainbow." And Estella believed her." (Rudnick 6). However, the brutal reality of the world clashes with this optimistic perspective and her unconventional style clashes with societal norms, leading to bullying from her peers and ostracization (Rudnick 6). Further injustice is highlighted when Estella's tormentor, a "ginger haired boy" (Rudnick 17), escapes consequences due to his family's wealth and influence (Rudnick 17).

This incident reflects the real-world challenges of confronting power imbalances and how the marginalised often face disproportionate consequences. Estella's pursuit of success in the fashion industry leads her to the Baroness, a renowned designer. Initially, Estella views this as an opportunity to realise her artistic potential. However, the Baroness's manipulative nature and her tendency to exploit subordinates quickly become apparent (Rudnick 67). This portrayal resonates with the experiences of many aspiring creatives who face exploitation and a lack of recognition within hierarchical systems. The discovery that the Baroness orchestrated her mother's death becomes the tipping point for Estella's transformation. The Baroness's callous indifference to the loss of life, "Her mother's death, which had left Estella orphaned, was an inconvenience? To her party?" (Rudnick 66) underscores her moral depravity. This revelation, coupled with the years of frustration and injustice, fuels Estella's rage and sets her on the path of revenge (Rudnick 91).

While not condoning Estella's future actions, the narrative invites empathy for her plight and a grudging understanding of the factors that shaped her into Cruella de Vil.

Disney's *Maleficent* (Novelisation of the 2014 film) offers a complex portrayal of its titular character, a powerful fairy who transforms from a benevolent protector to a vengeful antagonist. The narrative hinges on a pivotal moment of betrayal: Stefan, a human with whom Maleficent forms a close bond, severs her wings in order to secure his claim to the throne (Rudnick 67). This act of physical and emotional violation carries significant symbolic weight. The theft of Maleficent's wings can be interpreted as a metaphor for the loss of innocence and the brutal shattering of trust. In a contemporary context, it resonates with the vulnerability young women can face when betrayed by someone they considered a friend, particularly in situations involving drugging and physical harm (as alluded to in the passage).

The experience of betrayal profoundly alters Maleficent's worldview. Determined to prevent further exploitation, she vows vengeance on both Stefan and humanity as a whole, "She was going to make Stefan and the humans pay for what they had done." (Rudnick 72). This act of self-preservation manifests as a physical barrier, as she seals off the Moors, her magical realm, from human interaction. Furthermore, she actively seeks to destroy everything Stefan holds dear, highlighting the consuming nature of her vengeful rage.

- The Allure of the Flawed Villain: Ambition, Betrayal, and Revenge:

Villains are often more captivating when they possess recognizable human flaws. These flaws, such as ambition, jealousy, or a desire for control, create a sense of relatability that transcends their evil actions. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth exemplifies this phenomenon. Fueled by an insatiable ambition for power, she manipulates her husband into committing regicide. While technically distancing herself from the physical act, she becomes a central accomplice, instrumental in orchestrating and justifying Macbeth's ruthless deeds.

The audience is drawn to her cunning and ruthlessness, captivated by the lengths she is willing to go to achieve her goals.

Similarly, Disney's *Maleficent* presents a complex villain with relatable flaws. Initially depicted as a benevolent fairy who, alongside her kin, believes in peaceful coexistence with humans (Rudnick 2014), Maleficent experiences a devastating betrayal at the hands of Stefan. Rudnick (2021) poignantly describes this moment: "In that moment, a part of her died. The part that believed in joy, hope, and peace. The part of her that believed in love. That part was gone forever." However, Maleficent's villainy is not entirely devoid of understandable motivations. Her decision to curse Aurora can be interpreted as a manifestation of jealousy: "She would probably never have a baby at all. She could have, but that option had been taken away from her when Stefan betrayed her." (Rudnick 101). While this does not excuse her actions, it provides context for her animosity towards the innocent Aurora. Furthermore, Maleficent's vengeful actions can be seen as a distorted reflection of a primal human desire for retribution. "The pain she caused him now was so much like the pain he had caused her...over and over again." (Rudnick 103) The pain she inflicts upon Stefan is described as mirroring the pain he inflicted upon her.

Cruella de Vil's ambition serves as a cornerstone of her character in the film *Cruella* (Novelisation of the 2021 film). This ambition manifests in a multifaceted way. Initially, it fuels her determination to succeed in the fashion industry. She admires the Baroness, a renowned designer, for her talent and status, and this admiration fuels her own creative drive (Rudnick 2021). However, this admiration curdles into disillusionment when the Baroness proves to be dismissive and exploitative. The Baroness not only steals credit for Estella's (Cruella's pre-transformation persona) hard work but is also revealed to be the one who orchestrated her mother's death. The narrative portrays the pursuit of recognition and success as inherently human desires. Estella's initial plan is not outright revenge, but rather to surpass

the Baroness and achieve recognition on her own terms. However, the Baroness's complete lack of remorse upon confronting the truth about Estella's mother becomes a catalyst for a more destructive path. Estella, now fully embracing the Cruella persona, seeks to inflict the same level of devastation upon the Baroness that she herself experienced. Additionally, the novel explores deeper into an internal conflict. While Cruella's ambition propels her forward, there are moments of self-doubt. She questions her methods and the cruelty inherent in her words, particularly towards her companions. These moments of hesitation highlight the complexity of her character. Ultimately, however, ambition triumphs. She makes a conscious choice to harden her heart, believing this emotional detachment is necessary to achieve her revenge.

While villainous acts are never condoned, understanding the underlying causes can provide valuable insights. Gothel is driven by a profound fear of ageing, a fear that resonates with many readers. The loss of her sisters is another relatable element of her backstory. Grief and the yearning for lost loved ones are universal experiences. However, Gothel's manifestation of these emotions takes a twisted form. She views Rapunzel, a young girl with magical hair, not as a person but as a means to maintain her own youth. This possessiveness and manipulative behaviour highlight the destructive potential of unresolved trauma. Similarly, Lady Tremaine experiences a form of betrayal. Lured into marriage by false promises, her resentment towards Sir Richard is understandable. However, her mistreatment of Cinderella after his death represents an escalation of this resentment. An innocent child becomes a target for misplaced anger, a tragic consequence of unaddressed emotional wounds.

These narratives illustrate the potential for trauma to fuel a cycle of violence. Victims of trauma may be more susceptible to becoming perpetrators themselves, inflicting pain on others in a distorted attempt to reclaim control or alleviate their suffering. The villains'

actions of targeting innocent children, such as Rapunzel and Cinderella, represent the culmination of this cycle. It is important to emphasise that understanding these motivations in no way justifies the villains' actions. Their choices remain reprehensible. However, by examining the roots of their behaviour, we gain valuable insights. This knowledge can potentially help identify early signs of similar situations and intervene before they escalate into further violence, offering a glimmer of hope for breaking the cycle. By understanding the "why" behind the villain's actions, audiences can develop a more nuanced perspective on the character, even if they ultimately disapprove of their choices.

2.1.2: Relatability and Emotional Connection:

In examining the reasons behind the dislike of certain films, it is commonly asserted that the main character's perceived lack of likability plays a significant role. However, delineating the specific traits that render a character likeable provides deeper insight into this phenomenon. As elaborated by YouTuber *Magnify*, drawing from Eric Edson's book *The Story Solution* (2011), a character's likability can be determined by nine positive attributes: The character has courage or an unfair injury. They have skill. They are funny or just plain nice. They are in danger. They are loved by friends and family. They are hardworking or obsessed. According to Edson, for a character to be perceived as likeable, they need to exhibit only five of these nine traits. This understanding sheds light on why audiences may still empathise with characters despite their engagement in morally ambiguous actions.

- **The Underdog:**

The concept of the underdog holds a powerful place in storytelling. Readers are often drawn to characters who challenge authority or fight against perceived injustice. This phenomenon is evident in *Maleficent* (2014) and *Cruella* (2021). In *Maleficent*, the titular

character becomes the protector of the Moors, a magical realm, after the previous king establishes peaceful coexistence with humans. However, the new king, Stefan, covets the Moors' treasures and threatens this fragile peace. Maleficent, motivated by a desire to protect her home and avenge her own brutal betrayal at Stefan's hands (loss of her wings), becomes a formidable adversary. Despite facing a seemingly insurmountable disadvantage against Stefan's army, her unwavering determination to safeguard the Moors resonates with viewers. However, the concept of the underdog is not always clear-cut. Maleficent's curse placed upon the infant Aurora remains a villainous act, even if it stems from a place of deep-seated hurt. This highlights the complexity of reader perception. While Maleficent's fight against Stefan garners sympathy, her actions towards the innocent Aurora complicate this narrative.

Similarly, Cruella portrays a character with a more ambiguous moral compass. Estella, a young woman with artistic talent and ambition, seeks to establish herself within the cutthroat world of fashion, dominated by the wealthy Baroness. Estella's intelligence and creativity manifest in her elaborate schemes and dazzling designs, crafted to outshine the Baroness and establish herself as the new fashion icon. In the novel, Estella works meticulously. She works alongside the Baroness, secretly designing under her own persona, Cruella. With each act of sabotage against the Baroness, Estella's notoriety grows, fueled by the audience's growing dislike for the arrogant and exploitative Baroness. This dynamic creates a sense of satisfaction for viewers who witness Estella's talent being recognized, even if through somewhat deceitful means.

- Forbidden Desires:

Villainous characters often possess desires that violate societal norms or moral boundaries. These desires are often rooted in deep-seated fears or longings. By exploring these desires, narratives can create complex and compelling villains who challenge our

understanding of right and wrong. Gothel is consumed by the fear of mortality and becomes obsessed with a magic flower with powers to reverse aging. This obsession leads her to commit a series of morally reprehensible acts, including kidnapping the princess born with the flower's magic property, Rapunzel, whom she imprisons within a tower. Gothel's desire for eternal youth exceeded a simple fear of aging. It is also fueled by a yearning for her deceased sisters, a desire to somehow cheat death and reunite with them.

The narrative acknowledges the universality of grief and the human tendency to search for ways to cope with loss. Gothel's actions, however, highlight the destructive consequences of such desires when they lead to the violation of others' rights and freedoms.

CHAPTER 3: THE BLURRY LINE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

By engaging with contemporary storytelling, readers gain insights into the profound ways in which children's literature and media shape perceptions of morality, empathy, and the human experience. Moral ambiguity, characterised by the absence of clear-cut distinctions between right and wrong, emerges as a central theme under scrutiny. Through a detailed examination of characters' actions, motivations, and the ethical dilemmas they face, readers are invited to question the intricacies of moral decision-making within narrative contexts. Moreover, this chapter aims to highlight the role of ethical dilemmas in shaping plot directions and character development, highlighting their potential to provoke introspection and critical engagement among young audiences. By examining the theoretical groundworks of moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas, this chapter sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of their portrayal and implications within contemporary children's narratives.

3.1: MORAL AMBIGUITY AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS:

Moral ambiguity, defined by Merriam-Webster as "the lack of certainty about whether something is right or wrong" (Merriam-Webster), is a central theme in many contemporary narratives. Traditionally, storytelling has often presented good and evil as distinct and opposing forces. However, contemporary narratives increasingly explore the concept of moral ambiguity. Fairy tales often serve as lessons to children to encourage them to be patient like Cinderella, gentle like Aurora, adventurous like Rapunzel and always being kind is a must in fairytales. While these traits are something to inculcate, to what extent does one turn the other cheek to wrongdoings? In fairytales goodness always prevails in the face of adversity.

The concept of good overcoming evil is a prevalent theme in many fairy tales. However, contemporary retellings explore the complexities of morality and the grey areas that exist between good and evil as the world is seen more often in shades of grey rather than uncombined black and white. As individuals part of society strive to be good in order to live a better life but inherently humans are complex beings incapable of being entirely good. Even when we wish to make the right decision, the situation around us or other individuals may not agree with what an individual decides is a "good" decision. In these stories, characters' motivations and actions create complex situations where clear distinctions between right and wrong become difficult to make.

The phenomenon of 'Cancel Culture' refers when an individual's or an organisation's past actions or statements are exposed online, leading to a widespread public shaming and calls for their ostracization from social or professional circles. While this is a powerful tool that can hold influential people accountable for their misdeeds and give a voice to victims that are vulnerable or lack the resources to challenge their wrongdoers, it can also be fueled by mob mentality, leading to unfair persecution and a lack of nuance. In an era where 'Cancel Culture' is on the rise, its toxic nature often involves the widespread targeting and defamation of individuals. It can lead to a sense of victimisation and the portrayal of these individuals as villains, even without a complete understanding of the full context or both sides of the story. This tendency of mass-cancelling reflects the shift in how individuals, including fictional villains, are perceived and treated. The cancel culture events highlights the need for a more nuanced and empathetic approach to understanding complex character portrayals, moral ambiguity, and the potential for redemption in narratives, both in literature and in real-life situations.

The animated film *Wreck-It Ralph* (2012) presents a complex perspective on villainy by challenging the audience's perception of heroes and villains. The protagonist, Ralph,

embodies this complexity. Confined to the role of antagonist in his video game, Ralph yearns for the recognition and praise bestowed upon the game's hero, Fix-It Felix (Moore, et al.). His frustration stems from the ostracization he experiences solely due to his designated role. This sentiment is empathised with by Zangief, a fellow video game villain from *Street Fighter*, who declares: "Just because you're the bad guy, it does not mean you are a bad guy" (Moore, et al.). This statement, with its emphasis on the second "bad guy," underscores the distinction between a character's programmed function within a game's narrative and their inherent moral compass. Ralph's journey further emphasises this point. When he abandons his designated role and ventures into other video game worlds, the delicate balance within his own game is disrupted (Moore et al. 2012). Without Ralph fulfilling his antagonist role, the other characters lose their purpose and the game malfunctions. This consequence highlights the interconnectedness within video game narratives and it also challenges our simplistic categorization of characters as purely good or evil. Ralph's actions, while disruptive, stem from a desire for recognition, a desire that is not inherently evil. This complexity forces the audience to question their initial perception of Ralph and highlights the potential for characters to occupy a space between good and evil.

Morality, as a social construct, is inherently subjective and subject to contextual interpretation. In real-world scenarios, moral dilemmas rarely present clear-cut "good" and "evil" choices. Individuals often face situations that necessitate deviating from societal expectations of morality, or even require them to compromise their own moral principles for reasons of self-preservation or other compelling circumstances. The simple classifications of "good" and "bad" often fail to capture the nuances of human motivations and the multifaceted nature of morality. This can manifest in utilitarian decisions as well, where prioritising the greater good necessitates compromising personal ethics. As illustrated by the popular saying, "A hero would sacrifice you to save the world, but a villain would sacrifice the world for

you," moral judgments are inherently subjective and influenced by individual ethical frameworks, even when set by societal norms.

An ethical dilemma arises when an individual confronts a situation that compels them to make a choice between one or more options, neither of which may adhere to ethically sound principles. These principles could be personal values, professional codes of conduct, or societal norms. The focal point of the dilemma lies in the lack of the existence of a perfect solution. Each option necessitates some degree of ethical compromise. Often, ethical dilemmas involve a conflict between competing moral values. For example, a situation might compel an individual to choose between honesty, which may damage a cherished relationship, and deception, which is generally considered ethically dubious. This presents a challenging decision: to prioritise ethical principles and risk harming a loved one, or to prioritise the relationship and potentially violate ethical codes. Notably, while honesty can be necessary for the well-being of loved ones in certain circumstances, this does not always hold true. This highlights the inherent subjectivity of ethical decision-making.

3.2: GOOD VERSUS EVIL - AN ANALYSIS:

Fairy tales have long served as cautionary tales, offering clear moral lessons to children. These narratives typically present a distinct opposition between good and evil, with the righteous protagonists rewarded and villainous antagonists punished. This simplistic categorisation likely stems from a desire to provide easily comprehensible stories for children. However, the repeated use of stereotypical characters can lead to the unintentional reinforcement in children. Generations after generations have fallen in love with Walt Disney's iconic animated masterpiece, *Cinderella* (1950) , The core narrative – an orphaned girl mistreated by her stepmother and stepsisters, who ultimately finds happiness through kindness and beauty – has been retold countless times across various media. These retellings

often challenge the traditional portrayal of good versus evil and raise questions about societal expectations and the concept of destiny.

A central theme explored in these narratives is the concept of a "princess-to-be." and who is not. "Why weren't Cinderella's stepsisters Anastasia or Drizella marked as princesses-to-be?" (Valentino loc. 135) The original story implies a predetermined path for Cinderella, while her stepsisters are excluded despite their family's lineage. This begs the question: who gets to be a princess? Is it solely based on beauty and kindness, or are there other factors at play? The portrayal of the stepsisters also invites re-evaluation. Their jealousy towards Cinderella, while ultimately leading to negative actions, is presented as a complex emotion with understandable roots. The traditional narrative offers a clear-cut distinction between good and evil, but contemporary retellings explore the motivations behind such behaviour. Lady Tremaine's actions, fueled by a desire to secure her daughters' futures in a society that values appearance, can be seen as misguided but not entirely devoid of logic (Valentino Loc 761). This approach allows for a more complex understanding of the characters and the societal pressures they face. (Valentino 2021).

Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) presents a classic fairy tale trope: the evil fairy cursing an innocent princess. Maleficent, the villain, is enraged at not receiving an invitation to the princess's christening and casts a deadly curse upon the child (Geronimi, et al.). In the traditional narrative, Maleficent's seemingly petty motivation for cursing an innocent child blocks audience empathy, making it difficult to connect with a villain driven solely by revenge. However, *Maleficent* (2014) a reimagined narrative, exploring the events from Maleficent's perspective (Rudnick 2014). This retelling challenges the simplistic portrayal of good versus evil. We learn that Maleficent's motivation for cursing the princess Aurora stems from a deeper betrayal. King Stefan, once a friend and lover, deceives and injures Maleficent, stealing her wings for his own gain. Maleficent believed that the baby was the result of

betrayal and pain (Valentino 95). Blinded by rage and a desire for revenge, Maleficent curses Aurora, intending to inflict pain upon King Stefan. The retelling emphasises the psychological impact of betrayal, highlighting how Maleficent's actions stem from her own trauma.

As Aurora grows up, Maleficent develops a bond with the princess, recognizing her kindness and connection to the natural world – a sheer contrast to the greed of King Stefan. This growing affection leads Maleficent to experience remorse for her actions, realising she has mirrored Stefan's cruelty by manipulating Aurora's trust (Valentino 199). The traditional narrative resolves Aurora's curse through a "true love's kiss" from a prince she barely knows (Geronimi, et al.). The contemporary narrative, however, challenges this notion, suggesting that such passing infatuation is insufficient. True love, as depicted in *Maleficent*, is a deeper bond built on understanding and acceptance. Ultimately, it is Maleficent's maternal love for Aurora, forged through their shared experiences, that breaks the curse (Valentino 230).

Similarly, Disney's *Tangled* (2010) portrays another familiar fairy tale trope: mother Gothel, a wicked old witch, imprisons a young princess, Rapunzel, in a tower to maintain her own youth through a magical flower's power (Greno, et al.). Gothel's portrayal emphasises her obsession with beauty and selfishness, making it difficult for audiences to empathise with her motives (Greno, et al.). The retold narrative, *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch*, presents a reinterpretation of Gothel's character. This reimagined tale details Gothel's past, revealing a deeper motivation for her actions. We learn that Gothel seeks the flower's magic not for personal vanity, but in a desperate attempt to revive her deceased sisters. This revised backstory adds complexity to Gothel's character, making her motivations more understandable, though not necessarily excusable. Both narratives explore the concept of motherhood, albeit in contrasting ways. In *Tangled*, Gothel fulfils some aspects of a motherly role by caring for Rapunzel's physical needs, but she restricts her freedom and manipulates

her through emotional abuse (Greno, et al.). *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch* portrays Gothel as entirely different to Rapunzel's upbringing, instead hires a caretaker to assist her as her primary focus remains on achieving her own goals.

Disney's *101 Dalmatians* (1961) portrays Cruella de Vil as a fur-obsessed villain who kidnaps puppies for their spotted fur (Reitherman, et al.). While using any animal fur for fashion can be seen as outdated and insensitive, Cruella's desire for a Dalmatian fur coat is particularly outlandish. The film emphasises the sheer number of Dalmatian puppies Cruella desires, emphasises her cruelty and offers little explanation for her actions. However, the novelization of the live-action, *Cruella* (Rudnick 2021), offers a more complex perspective. The novelization explores Cruella's backstory, revealing a traumatic event that fuels her animosity towards dalmatians. The Baroness, Cruella's antagonist, used her dalmatians to push Cruella's mother off a cliff (Rudnick 27). This event shapes Cruella's desire for revenge, making her animosity towards dalmatians somewhat understandable.

The narrative also portrays Cruella's internal struggle: the conflict between her outward persona, Estella, and the re-emergence of the suppressed persona of Cruella (Rudnick 2021). This struggle highlights the complexities of villainy, suggesting that malicious actions can sometimes stem from a desire for justice or a response to past trauma. Across these four narratives, a recurring theme emerges: villains driven by a sense of injustice. While readers may sympathise with their desire for revenge, the characters' actions often target innocent bystanders, blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator. These retellings challenge the simplistic categorisation of good-versus-evil, prompting readers to consider the motivations behind villainy and the consequences of seeking revenge.

3.2.1: Societal Expectations and Prejudice:

In *Wicked, Selfish, and Cruel: An Inquiry into the Stepmother Narrative* (Silver 2015), Silver highlights the negative perceptions of stepmothers that fairytales have created. The study states that in popular culture, the character of the stepmother is often portrayed as wicked, selfish, and cruel, taking on a monstrous and abusive persona. Additionally, she notes that regardless of the translation, the cruel stepmother is consistently depicted in opposition to the loving and benevolent biological mother who, despite her unfortunate demise, continues to hold unwavering affection for her child.

Stepmothers in *The Grimm's Fairy Tales* are often memorable villains; that even among ogres, evil cooks, and cruel mothers-in-law, the term 'stepmother' carries a strong implication of wickedness, and the phrase 'wicked stepmother' is almost redundant in its association with villainy. (Silver 2015). Maria Tatar's book *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales: Expanded Edition* she states, "Enshrining the stepmother as villain brings with it the added advantage of exonerating both biological parents from blame for the miserable conditions at home" (Tatar 155) Thus implying that the 'evil stepmother' is an exaggerated character created for plot progress and as a foil to the biological mother.

Contemporary retellings, however, challenge this stereotypical portrayal. In *Cold Hearted*, the reimaged narrative of Cinderella's stepmother's perspective Valentino states: "It seems the lives of mothers in the Many Kingdoms are often cut short, and the stepmothers who replace them are almost always cruel and selfish creatures..." (Valentino Loc. 43) While Lady Tremaine initially welcomes Cinderella and considers her a daughter, her husband, Sir Richard, asserts his dominance and forbids any familial bond between them (Valentino Loc. 43). This external pressure and the enforced distinction between Cinderella and her stepsisters contribute to Lady Tremaine's prioritising her biological daughters and ultimately seals her reputation as the "wicked stepmother."

Similarly, in Rapunzel's case, mother Gothel would be considered the wicked stepmother as she not only kidnapped Rapunzel but also manipulated her. In the film, Gothel provided for Rapunzel's needs, her anger at disobedience exposes the lack of true love compared to the king and queen's affection. This reinforces the misconception in fairy tales that all stepmothers are evil (Valentino Loc. 46). These examples highlight how societal expectations and prejudices can create a situation where certain characters, like evil stepmothers, are almost forced into a villainous role and how this stereotype is ingrained in children in real life.

In *Cruella*, Estella's biological mother, the Baroness, exhibits a stark shift in behaviour once learning Estella's true identity. Prior to this realisation, the Baroness displays no maternal warmth. However, she attempts to manipulate Estella with displays of affection in a calculated effort to gain control. This deceitful behaviour contrasts sharply with Estella's stepmother, Catherine, who embodies genuine kindness and unwavering support throughout. Similarly, in *Maleficent*, the titular character, initially presented as an evil fairy, ultimately demonstrates motherly love for Aurora, eventually breaking the curse placed upon her. These portrayals challenge the stereotypical depiction of stepmothers as evil figures and highlight the diverse forms that maternal love can take.

3.3: EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS OF MORAL AMBIGUITY:

An Ode to Morality - Hidden Pearls of Wisdom as Seen in the Selected Tales of Grimm's Children and the Household Tales by J. Subhiktcha and Dr. K. Sindhu claims learning good moral values such as kindness, patience, humility, and courage are crucial for early development. These values become the foundation of a child's character and moral compass (Subhiktcha and Sindhu 2021). Traditional fairy tales, through their use of archetypes representing good and evil, aim to nurture moral behaviour by showcasing the

strengths and weaknesses inherent in human nature. This simplified categorization serves the purpose of introducing children to the concept of good versus evil. However, such dual classifications may not accurately reflect the complexities of human behaviour. Individuals possess a range of moral traits, with both positive and negative qualities coexisting. It is the relative prominence of these characteristics within each person that ultimately shapes their actions.

In *Children's Literature as an Important Tool for Education* by M. Sangeeta (2021), emphasises the potential of children's literature as a tool for bibliotherapy, particularly in addressing childhood bullying. Bibliotherapy can provide a unique opportunity for children to learn coping mechanisms for bullying situations. By exploring the underlying struggles, insecurities, or social anxieties that might contribute to bullying behaviour, children's literature can move beyond simply condemning the bully. This nuanced approach, while acknowledging the importance of consequences for bullying actions, can foster compassion and potentially equip young readers to identify early warning signs of bullying in their own social circles. This newfound awareness might empower them to intervene or seek help for themselves or others experiencing bullying.

Books that address bullying can serve as catalysts for classroom discussions, allowing children to explore different perspectives, develop critical thinking skills, consider the impact of their own actions on others, and contribute to a more positive and inclusive school environment where bullying behaviour is less tolerated and bystanders are empowered to act. For example, in the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, the character Draco Malfoy illustrates this complexity. While he serves as Harry's primary antagonist, the narrative reveals a troubled character shaped by his prejudiced family background and the pressure to conform to their expectations. This backstory suggests that his bullying behaviour might stem from his own insecurities and lack of control.

Reimagined classic fairy tales offer a valuable tool for fostering critical thinking in young audiences. These narratives depart from traditional portrayals of good and evil, introducing complex characters and situations that challenge simplistic moral binaries. This shift in perspective acknowledges the inherent complexity of human behaviour and the multifaceted nature of storytelling. By exploring the motivations and backstories of traditionally villainous characters, these retellings allow children to consider the difficult circumstances that might have shaped their actions. Additionally, exposure to narratives with moral ambiguity encourages children to develop critical thinking skills. These stories prompt them to question assumptions, analyse motivations, and consider the perspectives of multiple characters. By acknowledging the existence of moral grey areas, these narratives move beyond simplistic notions of right and wrong. Instead, they present the world in a more nuanced light, portraying characters with both positive and negative qualities. This complexity sparks discussions and allows children to explore their own developing moral frameworks within a safe and stimulating environment.

At around 3 - 4 years of age, children start to show morally-based behaviours and beliefs. Although young children might perform actions that resemble moral behaviour in older individuals, they lack the ability to form their own judgments of right and wrong. This capacity for moral reasoning develops later in childhood. (Dahl & Killen 2018). Therefore, the moral judgments to which children are exposed during their early years in various narratives and media can have a significant impact on their developing moral understanding. The novelization of *Maleficent* explores the complexity of the titular character's motivations. Initially portrayed as consumed by anger stemming from betrayal, Maleficent develops a growing affection for Aurora. This narrative shift highlights the potential for misguided anger to inflict harm on loved ones, a theme that resonates with human experience. Within the story, various characters offer contrasting perspectives on Maleficent's actions. While

Maleficent claims her curse on Aurora was unintended, it stemmed from her rage towards the king. Diaval, Maleficent's raven companion, cannot condone the cursing of an innocent child but understands her anger towards the king who threatened the Moors. However, Diaval remains unaware of the specific betrayal that fueled Maleficent's initial fury, mirroring real-life situations where we may lack complete knowledge of another person's motivations. This multifaceted portrayal challenges young readers to move beyond a simplistic interpretation of Maleficent as a villain and consider the motivations behind her actions.

In *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch*, Gothel's fear of aging motivates her to kidnap and imprison Rapunzel. Disney's film *Tangled* simplifies this motive, portraying mother Gothel's obsession with the magic flower as solely driven by a superficial desire for youth. This portrayal, however, leaves unanswered questions about Gothel's background and her frequent disappearances. The reimagined narrative however, presents a more complex portrayal. Gothel is driven by a desperate attempt to revive her deceased sisters, using the power of the magic flower. This backstory connects the flower not only to Rapunzel's magical hair but also to Gothel's own tragic past. Further, it clarifies her frequent absences as a search for a way to achieve her objective. This new motivation, while maintaining the conflict with Rapunzel's desire for freedom, adds a layer of complexity to Gothel's character. Here, the act of kidnapping is not solely driven by vanity, but by a profound grief and a misguided attempt to regain what she has lost. Both the film and the reimagined narrative depict the magic flower as initially belonging to Gothel. Having discovered its restorative properties, she likely views her actions as reclaiming what is rightfully hers, especially given her desperate circumstances. This justification, however, is clouded by the kidnapping of Rapunzel, a morally reprehensible act regardless of Gothel's motivations.

In *Cold Hearted*, as Lady Tremaine, an aristocratic widow, struggles to maintain a high standard of living for her two daughters in a society where women are restricted from

employment. This economic hardship resonates with contemporary single parents who face similar financial difficulties. Initially, Lady Tremaine is open to welcoming Cinderella as her own daughter however, Sir Richard was against the idea that anyone could replace Cinderella's birth mother. This highlights the societal stereotype that a stepmother can never truly love a stepchild. This portrayal reflects a persistent societal bias that often extends beyond the realm of fairy tales.

As young children are still developing their moral frameworks. Exposure to narratives with complex moral dilemmas might be confusing and make it difficult for them to differentiate between right and wrong. Some narratives with moral ambiguity can be emotionally challenging, especially for sensitive children. Witnessing characters grapple with difficult choices and potentially negative consequences might cause distress. The seriousness of these drawbacks depends on the specific narrative, the child's age and developmental stage, and the presence of adult guidance. To maximise the benefits and minimise the potential drawbacks, adult guidance is crucial.

CHAPTER 4: REDEMPTION FOR EVEN FAIRY TALES' MOST HATED?

4.1: THE EVOLVING ROLE OF REDEMPTION IN CONTEMPORARY FAIRY TALES:

For generations, fairy tales have captivated readers with stories of clear distinctions between heroes and villains, where the good always triumph over the evil regardless of the adversities they face. However, contemporary fairy tales have increasingly blurred these distinct lines, presenting villains in a more nuanced perspective with intricate backstories and deeper motivations to their seeming petty and malevolent actions. Traditional fairy tales focus on the theme of forgiveness. Protagonists readily forgive transgressors, regardless of the severity of their actions. This capacity for forgiveness is often portrayed as a key element leading to a protagonist's "happily ever after." The act of turning the other cheek is traditionally associated with strength and good moral character, contrasting with the bitterness and vengeful nature often exhibited by villains. This chapter analyses the evolving role of redemption in contemporary fairy tales in the selected texts: *Novelisation of Maleficent* by Elizabeth Rudnick (2014), the novelization of Disney's live-action *Cruella* by Elizabeth Rudnick (2021), *Cold Hearted* by Serena Valentino (2023) and *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch* by Serena Valentino (2018).

- **The Lack of Redemption Arcs in Traditional Children's Literature:**

Traditional fairy tales in children's literature rarely to never portray complex redemption arcs particularly for villains. Traditional fairy tales present a clear-cut moral universe with clear distinctions between good and evil. Villains embody pure evil, often driven by greed, envy, or a desire for power and control. Their motivations are rarely

explored, and they serve as obstacles for the hero to overcome. Antagonistic figures typically remain consistent with their villainous roles throughout the story. Traditional fairy tales rarely venture into the villain's perspective or inner workings. Their villainous nature is presented as a fixed characteristic rather than a result of choices or experiences. Additionally, the consequences faced by villains in traditional fairy tales are typically absolute, often involving death or banishment. These punishments rarely leave room for redemption. For example, in Disney's *Tangled* (2010), Mother Gothel experiences rapid aging once the magic in Rapunzel's hair is lost. She falls from the tower and crumbles to dust, signifying her demise.

In rare cases, villains might experience a change of heart due to external forces such as magical intervention, a selfless act by the protagonist, or even self-reflection on the villain's part. . However, this is not a common theme. For example, in *The Grinch* (2018), the animated film adaptation of Dr. Seuss' 1957 book *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!*, follows the Grinch and his pet dog Max who plan to stop Whoville's Christmas celebration by stealing all the town's decorations and gifts. After successfully stealing all the Christmas decorations and presents, the Whos, while disappointed, do not let it ruin Christmas and continue to celebrate and sing (Mosier, et al.). This unwavering positivity, presented as an external force, softens the Grinch's heart. Heeding a young girl, Cindy Lou's, advice and reflecting on his loneliness, the Grinch experiences a shift in perspective. He returns the stolen items, and remorsefully admits his actions and apologises to the Whos before returning to his cave. While the Grinch exhibits a change of heart, it can be argued that this doesn't constitute a complete redemption arc. He eventually joins the Whos' Christmas celebration, he realises that it was not really Christmas he despised, but being alone and his bitterness over being neglected suggesting ongoing internal issues.

- Rise of Redemption Arcs in Contemporary Children's Narratives:

In the traditional portrayal of villains in children's literature, punishment is swift and absolute, and redemption is rare. However, children's narratives increasingly explore the possibility of redemption for villains. This shift in storytelling raises questions about the evolving portrayal of morality. Morality, as a social construct, is subjective in nature, and lacks a perfect solution for all situations. Recognizing that humans are capable of mistakes and growth, contemporary retellings examine the potential for villains to receive second chances after facing the consequences of their actions.

Traditional fairy tales often portray extreme punishments for villains, aiming to leave a lasting impression on young readers about the consequences of wickedness. However, one can argue that such portrayals overlook the possibility of change after remorse. For example, in the novelization of Disney's live-action film *Maleficent* (Rudnick 2014) offers a nuanced portrayal of villain redemption. Initially consumed by resentment after a painful betrayal by her lover, Stefan, Maleficent casts a curse upon his infant daughter, Aurora. This act, fueled by a desire to inflict a similar level of pain, is devoid of malicious intent towards the baby itself. However, Aurora becomes an object of her jealousy, highlighting the blinding power of Maleficent's anger. As Aurora grows, an unexpected bond develops between her and Maleficent. This newfound connection evokes a sense of guilt within Maleficent, stemming from her earlier curse. Torn between her affection for Aurora and the burden of her actions, she remains unable to confess the truth. This perpetuates a cycle of deception, mirroring the betrayal she experienced from Stefan.

The narrative takes a significant turn when the three good fairies seek a prince to awaken Aurora with a true love's kiss. Maleficent, driven by remorse for her past deeds, vows to protect Aurora. This act marks a pivotal point in her transformation, signifying a desire to

rectify her wrongdoing. Ultimately, it is not a prince's kiss that awakens Aurora, but Maleficent's own kiss upon her forehead. This challenges the traditional fairy tale trope of true love's kiss arising solely from a romantic relationship. Instead, the narrative suggests that true love can exist in a broader sense, encompassing an understanding and acceptance of both good and bad qualities. Maleficent's redemption arc in *Maleficent* unfolds slowly throughout the narrative. Her initial acts of protection for Aurora subtly hint at a growing remorse. The narrative ultimately avoids a complete transformation into a pure "good fairy," instead showcasing a nuanced journey of pain and revenge towards reconciliation and self-acceptance. Redemption arcs often emphasise the importance of forgiveness as a means of healing and reconciliation. Characters who seek redemption may face forgiveness from others or may need to forgive themselves for past mistakes. Through forgiveness, characters can release themselves from the burden of guilt and resentment, fostering personal growth and emotional liberation.

4.2: CHARACTER EVOLUTION AND DEVELOPMENT:

This section explores how the characters within the selected contemporary fairy tale retellings navigate the complexities of morality and the potential for change. It examines the internal struggles faced by these characters, focusing on the psychological forces that drive their choices and actions. As well as how these characters grapple with the consequences of their past actions and the possibility of redemption.

4.2.1 Internal Conflict and the Potential for Change:

Contemporary fairy tale retellings often probe deeper into the psychology of their characters. Exploring the internal conflicts that these characters face, examining the motivations and desires that drive their choices, and how these conflicts create opportunities

for transformation and growth, questioning the notion of fixed villains and heroes. For example, Cinderella's stepsisters, Anastasia and Drizella, are portrayed as cruel and abusive. While their actions warrant consequences, should they be eternally condemned? In the 1950 classic Disney film's portrayal of Cinderella's forgiveness, despite the lingering guilt her stepsisters may carry, suggests a space for them to move forward with a sense of responsibility for their past actions.

Valentino's novel, *Cold Hearted*, offers a unique perspective on the aftermath of Cinderella's happily ever after by venturing into the lives of Lady Tremaine and her daughters. This retelling deviates from the traditional portrayal of villains receiving absolute punishment. Instead, it explores the lasting impact of Cinderella's departure on the stepmother and stepsisters. The narrative highlights the lasting consequences of Lady Tremaine's choices. The bitterness she feels upon learning of Cinderella's happiness is profound. As the passage states, "She had watched her life slip between her fingers" (Valentino Loc. 1964). This quote suggests a deep sense of loss and failure that fuels her resentment. However, Anastasia and Drizella began to change and regretted how they had treated Cinderella (Valentino Loc. 1974). This suggests that the stepsisters mature and gain a new understanding of their past behaviour. "They realised Cinderella wasn't being horrible to their mother as they thought in those early days; she, too, was just being controlled by her cruel and horrible father." (Valentino Loc. 1974). Their regret highlights the potential for growth and reevaluation of one's actions, even for characters traditionally portrayed as villains. While the narrative suggests that Lady Tremaine's actions contributed to the family's downfall, her internal monologue reveals a complex mix of emotions: "I've ruined everything. I've ruined my life and the lives of my daughters, all for a man who only had enough love in his heart for his dead wife and his daughter"(Valentino Loc. 1989). Despite this moment of self-awareness, she remains trapped in a cycle of negativity. Her

transformation into a cold, unmovable statue symbolises her emotional rigidity and unwillingness to embrace change (Valentino Loc. 2167).

In contrast, Anastasia and Drizella's journey suggests the possibility of redemption. As their mother descends into despair, they begin to question their past behaviour. They gain a new perspective on their actions, realising that Cinderella was also a victim of circumstance. Despite their fear, their decision to apologise to Cinderella signifies a willingness to take responsibility for their actions and seek forgiveness (Valentino Loc. 2167). Valentino's portrayal of these characters underscores the multifaceted nature of redemption. While absolute forgiveness may not be attainable for all, the narrative suggests that growth and change are possible, even for those who have caused harm. The contrasting fates of Lady Tremaine and the stepsisters highlight the importance of self-reflection, remorse, and a willingness to move forward from past transgressions. While the narrative mentions the fairy godmother's intervention, the main emphasis is on the internal struggles and choices of Lady Tremaine and the stepsisters.

In *Cruella*, the titular character, Estella, navigates through a complex series of internal conflicts. She grapples with a burning desire for revenge against the Baroness, the woman who killed her mother. This desire fuels her transformation into Cruella, a darker persona fueled by rage and a thirst for justice. However, this transformation comes at a cost. As Estella embraces her Cruella persona, she pushes away her friends who offered her support and kindness. This act highlights a secondary internal conflict: the struggle between vengeance and the yearning for connection. The novelization further emphasises this inner turmoil. Estella's conscious decision to fully embrace Cruella reflects a turning point, a sacrifice of her kinder self in the pursuit of revenge. Despite this transformation, moments of hesitation linger. She recognizes the loyalty and friendship of her companions, yet the façade of Cruella demands a harsh exterior. For example, the novelization suggests that Cruella may

not have actually harmed the dogs, going so far as to create a facade of cruelty by pretending to have made clothing out of their fur. This manipulation tactic highlights a cunning and ruthless streak, but it also hints at a potential underlying motive beyond pure villainy. Perhaps as a desperate attempt to gain power over the Baroness, or a twisted way of getting attention. While her actions remain cruel, this portrayal introduces the possibility of a more complex motivation lurking beneath the surface. This internal struggle underscores the complexity of Estella's character and the potential for redemption that might still exist beneath the surface.

Maleficent grapples with the pain of betrayal by Stefan, the man she loved, and the resulting shift from a loving protector of the Moors to a vengeful evil fairy. Despite her vow of revenge and initial disinterest in the baby she cursed, Maleficent develops a strong bond with Aurora, creating an internal struggle between her desire for vengeance and the emerging affection she feels for the very child she cursed. This affection creates a powerful internal struggle. Maleficent wrestles with her desire for vengeance and the emerging love she feels for Aurora. This conflict fuels her attempts to undo the curse and eventually leads her to take Aurora under her wing. The climax of the narrative showcases a crucial moment of transformation. Maleficent's vow to protect Aurora signifies a shift from revenge to redemption, a decision driven by her internal struggle and a newfound capacity for love and selflessness.

There's a potential argument for Mother Gothel experiencing some internal conflict. In the film *Tangled* (2010), When she breaks into the palace after Rapunzel's birth, her initial attempt to take only a lock of the baby's hair could be interpreted as a moment of hesitation. Perhaps she intended to avoid harming the child and solely exploit the flower's magic. However, the loss of magic upon cutting the hair necessitates kidnapping Rapunzel, shifting her focus to controlling the child as a vessel for the flower's power. While this interpretation

is open to debate, it highlights the possibility of a nuanced motive beyond pure malice. In the novel, *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch*. The narrative examines deeper into her past, revealing a focus on reviving her deceased sisters. This motivation, while self-serving, suggests a potential emotional vulnerability and a desire to reverse a past loss. However, this vulnerability does not translate into maternal affection for Rapunzel. The novel emphasises her neglectful parenting, leaving all caretaking to a servant. This reinforces the core aspect of her character – a cunning manipulator driven by her own desires.

The examples of Anastasia and Drizella, Cruella, Maleficent, and Mother Gothel showcase the spectrum of internal conflict within contemporary fairy tale retellings. These varied portrayals underscore the multifaceted nature of internal conflict and its role in shaping character development within contemporary fairy tale adaptations.

4.2.2 External Influences on Character Transformation:

Cruella showcases a complex interplay between internal and external forces. Estella's traumatic childhood experiences, marked by bullying and the tragic death of her mother, leave a deep mark on her psyche. These experiences fuel her vulnerability, which the manipulative Baroness exploits. Estella initially admires the Baroness, a prominent fashion icon, but this admiration turns to disillusionment as she discovers the Baroness's true nature of being exploitive and manipulating. Additionally, societal pressures that discourage individuality and reward conformity contribute to Estella's feelings of isolation and frustration. These external influences, coupled with her internal conflicts, culminate in Estella's transformation into Cruella. However, a crucial point to consider is the nuance of this transformation. While embracing the Cruella persona allows her to achieve revenge against the Baroness, the narrative highlights that this path doesn't entirely extinguish the kindness instilled by her mother. When confronted about Estella's mother's death, the

Baroness' lack of remorse acted as a catalyst for Cruella's rage as she vowed to kill the Baroness and her dogs (Rudnick 131). However, Cruella's ultimate refusal to kill the Baroness or her dogs underscores a line she isn't willing to cross, demonstrating a flicker of compassion beneath the surface.

In *Maleficent*, the titular character's transformation is profoundly influenced by her relationship with Aurora. Initially consumed by vengeance for Stefan's betrayal, Maleficent curses Aurora as a child. However, as Aurora grows up, an unexpected bond develops between them. Aurora's inherent kindness and innocence act as a catalyst for change within Maleficent. Witnessing Aurora's happiness challenges Maleficent's hardened exterior and forces her to confront her own capacity for love and forgiveness (Rudnick 164). This external influence, the growing bond with Aurora, interacts with Maleficent's internal struggle, ultimately pushing her towards a path of redemption. In *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch*, as mentioned, the magical flower and its ability to restore youth is the catalyst for her entire plan to revive her deceased sisters. In the film, she kidnaps Rapunzel, the baby infused with the flower's magic, to exploit its power for her own selfish desires. While the novel ventures deeper into her past, revealing her motivation to revive her deceased sisters, it ultimately emphasises her manipulative and self-serving nature. Both the film and the novel portray Mother Gothel as a character largely driven by external forces, with minimal exploration of internal conflict.

The examples of Cruella, Maleficent, and Mother Gothel illustrate the diverse ways external factors influence character development. While Cruella grapples with a complex web of external influences that shape her transformation, Aurora's presence acts as a catalyst for change in Maleficent. Mother Gothel, on the other hand, exemplifies how external forces, like the discovery of the magical flower, can dictate a character's actions without a significant exploration of internal conflict. These varied portrayals highlight the multifaceted nature of

external influences and their role in shaping character journeys within contemporary fairy tale adaptations.

4.2.3 Comparing Redemption Opportunities in Selected Texts:

While contemporary narratives increasingly explore the concept of redemption for villainous characters, there exists varying degrees of redemption opportunities. This highlights that the path towards redemption isn't universal, and some characters face greater obstacles than others. Within the selected narratives, Maleficent in *Maleficent* stands out as an example of complete redemption. Her backstory reveals a betrayal that fuels her initial desire for revenge. However, as she develops a bond with Aurora, Maleficent experiences a transformation. She begins to recognize the error of her ways and demonstrates remorse. This internal shift motivates her to actively rectify her wrongs. Ultimately, Maleficent's sacrifice for Aurora signifies her complete redemption, granting her forgiveness and a happy ending.

In contrast, *Cold Hearted* offers a more nuanced perspective on redemption. Lady Tremaine represents a character largely devoid of it. Consumed by resentment and guilt for her actions, she remains fixated on the past rather than seeking help or moving forward. However, the narrative offers a glimmer of hope for her daughters. As they recognize their mistreatment of Cinderella and seek forgiveness, the daughters are granted a second chance at redemption. This distinction underscores the idea that redemption may not be accessible to all characters within a single narrative. Redemption is a more ambiguous concept in *Cruella*. While she receives a chance to rebuild trust with her friends whom she had wronged, her path isn't a clear-cut act of atonement. Ultimately, Cruella's redemption lies in resisting the urge to completely succumb to her rage. However, she doesn't actively strive to become the "good girl" her mother envisioned. Instead, she embraces the "Cruella" persona, suggesting a partial

transformation rather than complete redemption. Mother Gothel, from both the film *Tangled* (2010) and the novel *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch*, exemplifies a character devoid of redemption. Both narratives result in her tragic demise. The novel probes deeper into her internal monologue, revealing panic and regret for failing her deceased sisters (Valentino 186). However, this self-centred guilt doesn't translate into remorse for exploiting Rapunzel. Ultimately, Mother Gothel's character highlights a crucial point – redemption isn't guaranteed, and some villains may remain locked within their self-serving desires until the very end.

The analysis of these characters reveals that the path towards redemption is not a one-size-fits-all journey. While Maleficent achieves complete redemption, characters like Lady Tremaine and Cruella face limitations on their opportunities for change. Mother Gothel's character serves as a reminder that redemption isn't inevitable for all villains. This spectrum of possibilities enriches the portrayal of villains in contemporary narratives, challenging the audience's perceptions of villainy and its potential for transformation.

4.3: EDUCATIONAL AND MORAL SIGNIFICANCE:

Children's narratives have long emphasised the concept of forgiveness. Protagonists often display remarkable grace by forgiving their antagonists, as seen in Cinderella's forgiveness of her cruel stepmother and stepsisters. Such acts of kindness despite suffering are central to the moral lessons embedded within these narratives, fostering values of compassion and understanding in young readers. However, the educational potential extends beyond the act of forgiveness itself. The narratives also offer valuable lessons for characters who receive forgiveness. The choices they make: whether to embrace bitterness or strive for self-improvement can be equally impactful.

The inclusion of redemption arcs in contemporary children's narratives challenge traditional notions of good and evil by portraying characters with complex motivations and moral grey areas. This expansion of moral complexity encourages readers and viewers to question simplistic moral categorization and consider the complex nature of human behaviour. By humanising characters who have traditionally been portrayed as villains, redemption arcs foster empathy and compassion among readers and viewers. Readers are encouraged to empathise with characters who are struggling with their past mistakes and root for their redemption, promoting a more compassionate outlook towards others in real life. Witnessing characters undergo redemption arcs can prompt readers and viewers to reflect on their own capacity for growth and change. The struggles and triumphs of these characters may resonate with audience members on a personal level, inspiring self-reflection and motivating them to strive for self-improvement and forgiveness in their own lives.

Redemption arcs often convey messages of resilience and hope, emphasising that even those who have made mistakes are capable of redemption and transformation. This message can provide comfort and inspiration to audience members who may be grappling with their own struggles and setbacks, instilling a sense of optimism for the future. Portraying villains in an empathic narrative with redemption arcs in no way excuses the magnitude of their actions and they must face appropriate consequences for their past actions. As children are still developing their moral frameworks, they should not be influenced into thinking that all transgressions can be simply forgiven or any wrong they commit would be forgiven after a while.

Ultimately, redemption arcs serve as poignant reminders of the importance of forgiveness, second chances, and the potential for change in shaping the human experience. Through these arcs, audiences are encouraged to reflect on their own capacity for growth and to cultivate empathy, compassion, and understanding towards others.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Fairytales have historically presented a magical world with clear distinctions between good and evil characters. However, literature often reflects the evolving values of society and as the world is increasingly understood as a complex mix of good and bad, contemporary narratives explore this nuance. Characters are no longer simply heroes or villains; they possess both positive and negative traits. Their environment, upbringing, challenges, and decisions all contribute to shaping their moral compass. This shift in storytelling raises several intriguing questions. How are portrayals of morality evolving? What is the power of forgiveness in shaping narratives? What messages are conveyed to young readers? This dissertation has explored the fascinating reconstruction of children's villain archetypes in contemporary narratives. Analysing the select texts revealed a remarkable shift from characters defined solely by evil to complex figures with nuanced motivations, internal conflicts, and even the potential for redemption.

This dissertation investigated the evolving portrayal of villains in contemporary children's literature. It aimed to understand how these multifaceted antagonists are presented and how they impact young readers. Three key research questions guided the analysis:

1. The psychological appeal of villains: Why are certain antagonists so captivating?
2. Moral ambiguity and ethical dilemmas: How do these narratives explore the complexities of right and wrong?
3. The role of redemption arcs: How do these arcs challenge traditional villain archetypes?

Through a close examination of select texts, including:

- *Maleficent* (novelization) by Elizabeth Rudnick (2014)
- *Cruella* (novelization) by Elizabeth Rudnick and Dodie Smith (2021)
- *Cold Hearted: A Tale of the Wicked Stepmother* by Serena Valentino (2023)
- *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch* by Serena Valentino (2018)

The research revealed a shift towards portraying villains with greater complexity. A detailed textual analysis methodology was employed, focusing on the actions, motivations, and ethical dilemmas presented within the narratives. This approach provided valuable insights into the potential benefits of exposing young readers to morally ambiguous characters. These narratives can foster critical thinking skills and encourage empathy towards characters who are not simply good or evil.

Key Findings:

- **Captivating Readers:** These reconstructed villain archetypes not only offer psychological depth but also capture readers' interest.
- **Moral Reflection:** The narratives encourage critical thinking about right and wrong, prompting readers to grapple with ethical dilemmas.
- **Potential for Change:** The exploration of redemption arcs demonstrates the possibility of transformation and its influence on readers' perceptions.
- **Shaping Young Readers:** Exposure to these narratives can contribute to the development of critical thinking and empathy skills in young readers.

Research Limitations:

- Scope: The research focused on a selected group of contemporary texts, potentially limiting the applicability of the findings to all contemporary children's literature featuring villains.
- Further Research: Future studies could explore a wider range of narratives across various cultural contexts.
- Character Focus: The selected texts primarily explore female antagonists, excluding male villain archetypes.
- Interdisciplinary Analysis: The study's depth might not fully explore the potential of interdisciplinary analysis combining literary analysis, psychology, and ethical studies.

Chapter 2: The Psychological Allure of Villainy explored the paradoxical attraction and repulsion audiences feel towards villains despite their wrongdoings. A key factor in this appeal lies in the exploration of villain complexity and motivations. Traditional fairy tales often portray villains as one-dimensional evil characters, rarely delineating into their motivations. Contemporary retellings, however, challenge this portrayal by exploring the reasons behind villainous actions. One technique contemporary narratives use is presenting sympathetic backstories for villains. By revealing past traumas, injustices, or societal pressures, audiences gain a deeper understanding of their motivations. This understanding can evoke empathy and even admiration for a villain's resilience in the face of adversity.

The dissertation explored Maleficent, the villain from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). In the original film, her motivation for cursing the baby princess Aurora appears petty - she wasn't invited to the baby's christening. However, in the live-action film (Novelization) *Maleficent* reveals a more complex backstory. Maleficent curses Aurora as a form of revenge against King Stefan, her former lover who betrayed her and stole her wings for the throne. While

audiences may sympathise with Maleficent's rage, harming an innocent child remains a difficult act to condone, even if the child is connected to her betrayer. This highlights the complex moral dilemmas contemporary narratives present. While viewers might not support Maleficent's actions, they can still find themselves rooting for her against the villainous king.

Chapter 3: The Blurry Line Between Good and Evil examined how morality is a complex issue, often shaped by social context and individual perspectives. Unlike fairy tales where good triumphs over evil in a clear-cut fashion, real-world situations are rarely so black and white. This chapter explored the idea that moral dilemmas often present individuals with difficult choices that lack clear-cut "good" or "evil" options. In real life, people may find themselves forced to deviate from societal expectations of morality or even compromise their own principles for self-preservation or other compelling reasons. Simple classifications of "good" and "bad" often fail to capture the nuances of human motivations and the multifaceted nature of morality. The Disney film *Cinderella* (1950) portrays the stepsisters as exaggerated villains: whiny, envious, and cruel. Their physical appearance is presented as clumsy and unrefined compared to Cinderella's graceful demeanour. However, the novel *Cold Hearted* offers a more nuanced perspective on Lady Tremaine's actions. Here, we see her motivations rooted in a desire to secure her daughters' futures in a society that values (Valentino Loc. 1774). While misguided, her actions are not entirely devoid of logic.

Additionally, contemporary retellings challenge the stereotypical portrayal of stepmothers as inherently evil figures. In *Cruella*, Estella's biological mother, the Baroness, embodies deceit and cruelty, contrasting sharply with Estella's stepmother, Catherine, who represents unwavering support and genuine kindness. Similarly, *Maleficent* surpassed expectations by portraying the titular character, initially presented as a vengeful fairy, as ultimately driven by a deep love for Aurora, the princess she once cursed. These narratives showcase the complexities of family dynamics and highlight the diverse forms that maternal

love can take. By dismantling the one-dimensional villainous stepmother trope, such stories encourage a more nuanced understanding of parental figures and the power of love in its various forms.

The portrayal of villains in children's literature has undergone a significant transformation. This dissertation was inspired by the growing complexity of these characters, particularly the exploration of redemption arcs in contemporary fairy tales. Traditional fairy tales often presented a clear-cut moral universe with readily forgivable protagonists and swiftly punished villains. Redemption was rare. However, contemporary narratives challenge this simplistic portrayal. This dissertation investigates this shift by analysing select texts. The research findings highlight that the path towards redemption is not always straightforward. Some characters, like Maleficent, receive a complete arc of redemption. In *Cold Hearted*, Lady Tremaine remains consumed by past wrongs, but her daughters are shown a path towards redemption by acknowledging their mistakes and seeking forgiveness. Similarly, Cruella embraces a new identity that isn't necessarily "good," but represents a transformation nonetheless. Mother Gothel, on the other hand, exemplifies a character entirely devoid of redemption in both film and novel versions.

This research emphasises the valuable role of children's literature in fostering moral development. However, it's important to acknowledge the potential challenges associated with narratives that explore moral complexity. Young children might struggle to understand these narratives, and sensitive children could find them emotionally overwhelming. The seriousness of these concerns depends on the specific story, the child's age, and the presence of adult guidance. To maximise the benefits and minimise the drawbacks, active adult involvement is crucial. Adults can help children navigate complex themes, fostering critical thinking and ensuring a positive learning experience.

To conclude, this dissertation has highlighted the significance of the evolving portrayal of villains in contemporary children's literature. As hypothesised, the multifaceted portrayal of reconstructed villains challenges traditional notions of morality. By exploring moral complexity and moving beyond simplistic categorisation of good versus evil narratives, these stories offer valuable opportunities for young readers. Engaging with these characters can foster a deeper understanding of the nuances of human behaviour. This research contributes to the field of children's literature by emphasising the potential of these narratives to shape young readers' moral development and their understanding of the world around them. It demonstrates how reconstructed villains can become catalysts for moral reflection, promoting critical thinking and empathy skills. It is hoped that this work will spark further discussion and exploration of this dynamic relationship between storytelling, morality, and the human experience.

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APPENDIX I

SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVELIZATION OF *MALEFICENT*

Maleficent, set in a magical world divided between the human kingdom and the magical Moors, retells the story of *Sleeping Beauty* from the perspective of the villain, Maleficent.

Maleficent, a powerful fairy with wings and magical abilities, protects the peaceful Moors from human encroachment. However, like her deceased parents, she believes that all humans are not bad. She befriends a young human boy named Stefan, who shares a love for the Moors. Over time, their friendship blossoms into love. Stefan harbours a secret ambition to become king.

King Henry, the ruler of the human kingdom, attempts to conquer the Moors. Maleficent mortally wounds him in battle, protecting her home. On his deathbed, Henry declares that whoever kills Maleficent will be named his successor and marry his daughter. Consumed by ambition, Stefan sets off to the Moors. He drugs Maleficent and severs her wings with iron chains that burn fairies, a secret that Maleficent had shared with him. Maleficent awakens in excruciating pain to this horrific betrayal and is filled with rage and vengeance.

Maleficent learns that the new king, Stefan and his wife have welcomed a baby girl and a grand christening was to be held. Fuelled by rage and jealousy, Maleficent curses the baby to “. . . prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall into a sleep like death. A sleep from which she will never awaken.” (Rudnick 103).

Years pass, and Maleficent discovers Aurora, the princess, living in the woods with three fairies that had also been at the christening. As Aurora grows up, Maleficent finds herself

unexpectedly drawn to the innocent and kind-hearted princess. She secretly watches over Aurora and even protects her from dangers in the forest.

The guilt of her curse makes Maleficent remorseful as she forms a kindred bond with Aurora and attempts to reverse her curse, but to no avail. She decides to take Aurora to live with her in the Moors to protect her from spindle wheels, to which Aurora happily agrees. As of now close to her 16th birthday, the three good fairies tell Aurora about her curse. Shocked, Aurora confronts Maleficent, who tells her the truth about her curse. Betrayed and heartbroken, Aurora leaves and the three good fairies send her to the palace, a day earlier than they were supposed to. At the castle, king Stefan had long lost his mind and was consumed by the desire to kill Maleficent and conquer the Moors. He locks Aurora in a room, where she pricks her finger on a spinning wheel spindle. The curse takes effect, and she falls into a deep sleep.

The three good fairies attempt to wake Aurora with a true love's kiss. However none of the men knew Aurora to love her for anything other than her beauty. Prince Philip, a prince she did meet, also proved to be unsuccessful. Maleficent, deeply remorseful, vows to protect Aurora from all harm until her last breath and in a heartfelt act of love, kisses Aurora's forehead, breaking the curse.

Maleficent confronts Stefan, who attempts to kill her with an iron weapon. Aurora intervenes by unlocking Maleficent's sealed wings. Maleficent ultimately emerges victorious and king Stefan falls to his death.

The human kingdom and the Moors are united, with Aurora as a bridge between the two worlds. Maleficent embraces her role as a protector and a guardian figure to Aurora, forging a complex and unexpected bond.

The novelization of love action film explores themes of betrayal, revenge, forgiveness, and the power of love. It challenges the traditional portrayal of villains as purely evil, offering a nuanced perspective on Maleficent's motivations.

APPENDIX II

SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVELIZATION OF *CRUELLA*

Cruella de Vil, the iconic villain from Disney's *101 Dalmatians*, gets an origin story in *Cruella*. Set in 1970s London, the novelization of the live-action film explores how Estella, an ambitious girl transforms into the infamous Cruella.

Estella, a young girl with unique black and white hair, possesses a rebellious spirit and a talent for fashion design. She clashes with her loving but overprotective mother, Catherine, who struggles to control Estella's wild streak. However, Catherine is always kind and supportive to her.

When Estella is expelled from her school. Her mother decides they should move to London for a new life. On the way, they stop at a mansion atop a cliff that seemed to have a ball. Estella was asked to stay in the car, however, her curiosity got the better of her and leaves to get a better look. After running around a bit, she finds her mother talking to that evening's host. Tragedy strikes as Catherine is attacked by a trio of dalmatians that knock her off a cliff, leading to Catherine's death and Estella blaming the dogs as well herself for not listening to her mother.

While lost and alone in London, Estella befriends Horace and Jasper, two petty thieves who appreciate her mischievous nature. Estella joins forces with Horace and Jasper, using her fashion skills to create elaborate disguises for their gifts.

While working at a fashion store, Estella catches the eye of Baroness von Hellman, a renowned fashion designer known for her elegance and cruelty. Estella becomes an assistant to the Baroness, initially excited to learn from the fashion icon she admired so much. Admiration curdles to disillusionment as Estella learns that the Baroness is exploitative and stole credit for Estella's work.

As Estella probes deeper into the Baroness' world, she uncovers a dark secret. It was the Baroness who had ordered the dogs to knock her mother off the cliff. The Baroness had killed her mother. Driven by anger and a desire for revenge, Estella fully embraces the "Cruella" persona. Using her talent and cunning, Cruella sabotages the Baroness' fashion shows, gaining notoriety and public recognition in the process.

Cruella now comes up with elaborate schemes and dazzling designs to upstage the Baroness and label her as the "old", while herself as the "new" icon in the fashion industry. The Baroness catches on the similarities between Estella's recent suspicious behaviour and Cruella's public appearances. She attempts to kill Cruella by burning her down with the building. Miraculously, she is saved by none other than the Baroness's loyal attendant. He tells Estella a secret that he's been keeping. The Baroness is not who she seems and is revealed to be Estella's biological mother, who abandoned her as a baby.

Cruella regains her motivation to upstage and exact her revenge and plans a grand entry at a masquerade ball at the Baroness' mansion. When the Baroness learns that Cruella is the daughter she thought she had gotten rid of, she tries to manipulate Estella back under her control. When she pulls Estella in for a hug, she pushes her off the cliff. However, this incident was witnessed by all the guests and the Baroness was taken to prison. Estella, who had predicted the

Baroness' actions, had a parachute and glided to safety. She then remade a dramatic appearance as Cruella, providing a will that stated that Estella, the true owner of the Baroness' wealth, had left everything to her.

Cruella now fully embraced her new persona. She had a fake funeral for Estella and in the eulogy stated: "A nice girl, quiet, sweet . . . but a little bit boring and a tiny bit scared. Trapped by her past, unsure of the future. Murdered tragically." (Valentino 153). The novel focuses on Estella's motivations and the events that shape her into the villainous Cruella de Vil. It explores themes of identity, belonging, ambition, and the duality of human nature.

Unlike the traditional Cruella, this iteration experiences a loss that fuels her desire for revenge. The story provides a sympathetic backstory for the villain, allowing readers to understand, though not necessarily condone, her actions.

APPENDIX III

SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVEL *COLD HEARTED: A TALE OF THE WICKED STEPMOTHER*

Even the coldest of villains are sometimes wives and mothers, women who loved and lost and hoped for something grander for their lives. Serena Valentino's novel introduces the infamous wicked stepmother - Lady Tremaine, Cinderella's stepmother. This novel explores a different perspective of the well known tale and portrays the story from the stepmother's perspective.

The tale begins with learning about what happened to Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters after she sets off to marry the Prince. It is learned that the fairy godmother could not forgive them for the villainous deeds like Cinderella had, so she had trapped them in Cinderella's childhood home. After a request by Cinderella, the fairy godmother and another fairy take a look at Lady Tremaine's past to decide if she deserves a second chance. They learn that Lady Tremaine was a lonely widow who after much persuasion agrees to marry Sir Richard of the Many Kingdoms. She was promised a better life for herself and her daughters with the condition of being a mother to Sir Richard's own daughter.

Blinded by love, Lady Tremaine ignores warnings about Sir Richard's true character and his financial woes. She marries him, hoping for a happy family. Sir Richard proves to be a reckless and self-serving man. He prioritises his own daughter over the well-being of his new family. Lady Tremaine struggles to keep the household afloat as Sir Richard dismisses all the help and leaves the chores to Lady Tremaine and her daughters. Sir Richard passes away and

Lady Tremaine regains her autonomy. However, the bitterness and resentment she felt from the marriage lingered and this residual resentment shifted onto Cinderella.

Lady Tremaine decided she would do what she could to keep Cinderella from attending the kingdom's ball, to give her daughters a better chance. In her eyes, Cinderella had done everything in her power to make Lady Tremaine's life unbearable, and she wasn't going to let her ruin this opportunity for her daughters, not after everything she had already done to them. This time her daughters would shine, and they would finally have a happier life, the one she had hoped for when they first moved to this miserable place.

The plan fails and Cinderella attends the ball and ultimately marries the Prince. When the Fairy Godmother approaches the locked up Tremaines she tells them that Lady Tremaine was destined to come to the Many Kingdoms and marry Cinderella's father, and his abuse would turn her into a monster, causing her to abuse his daughter in turn. It was a destiny that she couldn't have changed even if she was aware of. The Fairy Godmother claimed that even if she could help them, she wouldn't (Rudnick Loc. 1898). Not after everything they have done to Cinderella.

Lady Tremaine was doomed to become crueller and more gruesome as the years passed. She had watched her life slip between her fingers. She had moved to another world to be with a man she thought was in love with her, only to find he was using her for her money. Anastasia and Drizella, however, started to change. As their mother fell deeper into madness and despair, they started to regret how they had treated Cinderella. They saw the story differently, through the eyes of young women rather than children. They would sit up in their rooms at night talking about their childhood and putting all the pieces together. They realised Cinderella wasn't being horrible

to their mother as they thought in those early days; she, too, was just being controlled by her cruel and horrible father.

The Fairy Godmother and Nanny, the other fairy, let Anastasia and Drizella leave the house. They decide to apologise to Cinderella and head back to London to start anew. Lady Tremain was turned into a statue and had finally turned cold, solid, and unmovable, as she had wished.

The novel challenges the stereotypical portrayal of Lady Tremain as a purely evil villain by offering a more sympathetic understanding of Lady Tremain's actions and motivations.

APPENDIX IV

SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVEL *MOTHER KNOWS BEST: A TALE OF THE OLD WITCH*

In Serena Valentino's novel, *Mother Knows Best: A Tale of the Old Witch*, the villain from Disney's *Tangled* takes centre stage. The story follows Gothel, a Witch born to a powerful necromancer, the Queen of the Dead, Manea.

Gothel has two loving sisters, born a few apart from each other, but their mother treats them all poorly, seeing them as disappointments compared to her dark magic legacy. The three sisters were perfectly content to live their lives in the forest, letting their mother do her magic, having no idea how it worked. Gothel wishes to learn magic from her mother despite how gruesome it was.

Manea shows her daughters the only living plant in the Witch's Forest, a magic flower called Rapunzel. This flower had the ability to regain youth and was the key to their magic. Manea was going to teach Gothel all about it. Manea showed her daughters that their magic comes from the dead and that is why the villages surrounding the forest are required to send their dead to them.

Primrose, her sister, was going to make Gothel choose between her and Mother's magic, she would pick her sisters. And if her mother disowned her for changing her mind, then she would leave with her sisters and learn how to live in the world without magic. As long as she had

her sisters with her, she would be happy. However this promise soon fell short as their mother saw Gothel's sisters as an obstacle holding Gothel back. She kills both her daughters much to Gothel's horror. Gothel throws a lamp into the conservatory where the flowers grew and sets it ablaze. The flames overtook the conservatory. Gothel snatched up one of the rapunzel flowers before the conservatory started to collapse, as her mother turned to dust, crumbling before her eyes. Gothel watched in horror as her mother withered into a dry husk and disintegrated.

Unable to come to terms with the death of her sisters, she begins to search her mother's work to find a way to resurrect them with the flower's magic.

Not long after, a king from a neighbouring kingdom destroyed Gothel's home and stole the last remaining flower to save his queen, pregnant with their child. Gothel makes the decision to kidnap the baby imbued with the flower's magic. She hires Mrs. Pickle to take care of the baby in a secluded tower as she resumes her work to revive her deceased sisters.

As Rapunzel grows, around her eighteenth birthday, she asks Gothel to leave the tower to see the floating lanterns that always appear on her birthday. Gothel turns her down. Rapunzel's perspective follows the similar storyline to that of the film *Tangled*. She meets Flynn Rider, who agrees to take her to see the lanterns on the condition that she returns the crown she hid from him.

Similar to the film, Gothel manages to get Rapunzel to return back to the tower with her by manipulating her into thinking Flynn Rider deceived her. However, Rapunzel realises that it was actually Gothel that's been deceiving her the entire time and that she's actually the lost princess.

When Eugene (Flynn Rider) arrives at the tower to save Rapunzel, Gothel gravely stabs him and he begins bleeding out quickly. Rapunzel desperately pleads to Gothel to let her save

him and that she would never run away again. Gothel agreed. She finally had her flower. Rapunzel would go without a struggle. Gothel would take her to the dead woods, and they would be together, along with her sisters. They would never grow old and they would never die. They would never turn to dust like their mother. She would never suffer the indignity of death—of the horrible death she had given her mother. She was finally going to have the life she wanted.

Eugene, however, cuts Rapunzel's hair causing it to lose its magical properties as it turns brown. Gothel screamed. She was suffering the same fate as her mother. She started to wither. She started to age. It was horrific. And the pain, it was worse than she had imagined. It consumed her. It devoured her from within. She ran to the mirror, trying to find the odd sisters, trying to find someone who could help her. She couldn't leave her sisters alone. What would become of them? She had failed them. She had failed her sisters. She was going to die. Gothel was turning to dust as she fell to her demise.

The novel explores Mother Gothel's motivations beyond a typical villain archetype. It examines the themes of family loyalty, sacrifice, and the complexities of love and control.

The story offers a more nuanced perspective on Gothel's character, revealing a tragic past and a flawed yet protective instinct towards her sisters.