

IN DEFENSE OF CINDERELLA'S STEPFAMILY: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FEMALE ANTAGONISTS IN "CINDERELLA" AND "EVER AFTER: A CINDERELLA STORY"

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ABSTRACT: *Wicked Stepmother is a common trope in fairy tales of many cultures. In these tales the wicked stepmother is usually set up as a foil against an innocent heroine, who is treated cruelly by her. One of the most famous Stepmothers is Cinderella's, in the popular fairy tale, recognized by popular culture especially through Disney's 1950 Cartoon. Disney's animation portrayed Cinderella's stepfamily as evil incarnates, and helped in forming the public opinion on cruel stepmothers. On the other hand, Ever After: A Cinderella Story (1998) is an attempt to revamp the Cinderella fairytale with a historical context, in the early 16th century, France. The movie challenges the concept of female stereotypes especially in the fairy tales. The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast Cinderella's stepfamily in the Disney animation and the movie adaption to better understand and defend the reasons for their so-called cruelty and evilness.*

KEYWORDS: Cinderella, Stepmother, Stepsister, Disney

Wicked Stepmother is a common trope in fairy tales of many cultures. In these tales the wicked stepmother is usually set up as a foil against an innocent heroine, who is treated cruelly by her. In these tales the heroine is a pure, kind and silent girl while the stepmother is wicked and powerful. Cinderella story is a famous example with a nasty stepmother, but there are numerous other tales similar in this sense in different cultures and languages. In these tales female antagonism is very common. These wicked stepmothers all show similar characteristics; they are usually jealous of their stepdaughter's beauty and status and want to claim what is rightfully the heroine's. Tatar (1999) states that "[t]he plots of "Cinderella" stories are driven by the anxious jealousy of ... stepmothers who subject the heroine to one ordeal of domestic drudgery after another" (p. 102).

The question that raises here is that why Cinderella and her treatment by her stepfamily is, in Zipes' (2006) words, so "contagious and has spread and will continue to spread in different forms in the twenty-first century?" (p. 114). This is how he answers it:

We live at a time when there are numerous divorces, numerous families with stepchildren and stepparents, numerous dysfunctional families, and a high rate of child abuse. "Cinderella" as imaginative narrative does not mince words but uses words and images to tell things as they are, or as they might potentially develop for stepchildren—with hope that we can understand and overcome abuse. (p. 114)

According to Zipes (2006), "most abuse in stepfamilies is caused by the stepfather, not the wicked stepmother" (p. 114). So why stepmothers (especially wicked ones) and not stepfathers have become the stock characters of fairy and folk tales? One reason can be that, "the Brothers Grimm changed mothers into stepmothers to make the violence perpetuated by the maternal villains in their tales more palatable" (Williams, 2010, pp. 262-263). But we see the evil

stepmother in Perrault's version which was written at least a hundred years before Grimms' version. The more probable reason is that, the abused stepdaughter became a "stock character" of popular tales because of high mortality rates during childbirth leading to remarriage by many widowers, whose new wives often felt threatened by children of earlier marriages (Darnton, 1989, p. 33). As Baum (2000) observes, "[i]n fairytales, motherlessness indicates an absence of quality attention and the necessity (given the staggering amount of handiwork done at home) for men to remarry. Their second wives are invariably brutish, and fathers die off like flies" (p. 74). As Garry and El-Shamy (2005) further explain:

[M]ortality rates were very high in the preindustrial times when most traditional fairy tales were evolving. Economic pressure to remarry quickly following the death of a spouse led to many matrimonial mismatches, or at least the expectations of the twenty-first century would label them as such. Substantial differences in emotional makeup and age were common. For a child to have a stepparent was not unusual, and often the replacement parent would be quite unlike the deceased one. (p. 362)

Garry and El-Shamy (2005) also raise this question that why stepmothers, and not stepfathers, are constantly the villains of traditional fairytales especially since most of the storytellers were females. This is how they answer it:

One explanation is socialization, for in a strongly patriarchal society no one, not even in a fantasy tale, would be comfortable laying too much blame on male characters. Further, by placing other mother figures in bad light, the female storytellers could make themselves look good by comparison. These tales of abusive females also serve as a warning to the man of the house, who—given the realities of mortality—soon might be looking for a new wife. (p. 362)

These stepmothers depicted in many fairy tales are attempting to undermine their stepchildren to ensure the biological and financial success of their own children. Baum (2000) points out that a mother "must protect her own offspring – particularly if the physical attractiveness of another female threatens their own reproductive success" (p. 75). Garry and El-Shamy (2005) try to explain the stepmother's hostility towards her stepchild by stating that in a woman's opinion "her own daughters are in competition with their stepsister for limited rewards, typically a wealthy and powerful husband" (p. 365). An interesting phenomenon in the era of Cinderella is that women regarded families as their whole career; hence, marriage turned out to be their primary concern. Many women hunted in their lives for marrying someone who is wealthy and handsome. As a result, Cinderella and her stepsisters' relationship is "strongly influenced by sibling jealousy and rivalry" (Moilanen, 2009, p. 95). And "the stark contrasts between them signal their marriageability. These sisters are in competition for a mate" (Haase, 2008, p. 870). Indick (2004) observes that:

The motif of the cruel stepsister is another psychologically significant theme in traditional societies, in which the only way young women can actively define their identities is by marrying the best suitor. In the old days, there must have been great competition between maidens for the best bachelors. Certainly, this competition was often the fiercest between sisters and stepsisters in the same house. For Cinderella, any force that would have come between her and her Prince Charming would be perceived as being cruel and evil. (p. 99)

So if we believe that Cinderella story “depicts the desperate struggle of young women to secure an appropriate husband”, then it is only natural for “[t]he stepsisters [to] hate Cinderella because she is a rival” (Hourihan, 1997, p. 202).

Feminist theory has also analyzed fairy tales, and the tales, including those involving the wicked stepmother, are seen as part of the way society trains women to be submissive by showing agency as dangerous or as owned by men only. These theories state that there are differences in the way male and female characters are portrayed in fairy tales: male power is portrayed as positive while female power is viewed as negative. Williams (2010) states that, “[s]tepmother is a conflation of the powerful female characters with agency, and they are mostly, if not always, dangerous in the fairy-tale realm” (p. 263). O'Brien (1996) argues that the stepmother replacing the father entirely in *Cinderella* “fosters the patriarchal view that strong women are evil and are detrimental to the proper upbringing of children” (p. 162). Tatar (1999) also believes that “[e]verywhere we look, the tendency to defame women and to magnify maternal evil emerges” (p. 105). Any strong female characters that do have power are seen as wicked and evil, like the stepmother, who is manipulative and deceitful throughout the *Cinderella* fairy tale. In fact the *Cinderella* story “is a tale of perfidy and female treachery. The bad characters are all female”. In *Cinderella* what we constantly see is “Female hatred, Female sabotage [and], Female jealousy”. It is shown to us that “the way to win a prince is over the ugly bodies of our competitors, who are similarly trying to cut our throats” (Baum, 2000, p. 76). Hourihan (1997) also observes that, “[t]wo of the most famous fairy tales of all, ‘Cinderella’ and ‘Snow White’, are primarily concerned with hatred and rivalry between women”, and that “[t]he women in the ... story are rarely shown as involved in any kind of relationship with each other, and where a relationship between women ... is featured it is almost invariably hostile and destructive” (p. 201).

Williams (2010) believes that it was Walt Disney with his portrayal of the wicked queen in his 1937 animation *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* which solidified the terrifying image of the wicked stepmother. She continues to observe that, “[s]ince then, the wicked stepmother has become a stock figure, a fairy-tale type that invokes a vivid image at the mention of her role—so much so that stepmothers in general have had to fight against their fairy-tale reflections” (p. 255). Henceforth, the tradition of showing the stepmother as an evil incarnate continues; with Disney’s *Cinderella* in 1950 being the prime example.

One of the reasons the men in the 1950 cartoon do not have a prominent role is that *Cinderella*, in the Disney version (which is based on Charles Perrault’s tale), is a story of treachery among women. The very core of this story is that if one man sentences you to live among bitches, only another man can save you. O'Brien (1996) argues that, “Disney’s princesses ... do not have mothers or grandmothers and ... sympathetic sisters. Thus, the only system in which Disney characters can potentially find happiness is a patriarchal one because that is the only option” (p. 180). In many forms of the *Cinderella* fairy tale, the stepsisters are not ugly; in some, they are said to be even beautiful—they are just really mean. In Disney’s version the stepsisters are depicted as ugly, inelegant, and cheeky upstarts who cannot compete with Cinderella’s beauty. It is as if by making them ugly Disney is trying to insinuate that compared to their sister they do not deserve to meet a prince. In the Disney cartoon, they have long noses and funny expressions, contrasted with Cinderella’s perfect and pretty face. The stepmother’s prominent nose and pointed chin are, of course, reminiscent of witches across time. Hourihan (1997) confirms that, “Walt Disney’s cartoon images of the evil stepmother in the film[s] ... also

conform to the pattern. The implication that female ... [power] equates with evil has become a commonplace of popular entertainment for children" (p. 183).

Ever After: A Cinderella Story (1998) starring Drew Barrymore as an adventurous and intellectual heroine named Danielle is an attempt to revamp the *Cinderella* fairytale with a historical context, in the early 16th century, France. This quirky, modern update to the famous fairytale, adapts the Cinderella story for contemporary audiences. It can be called an anti-Disney interpretation of Cinderella. *Ever After* changes the way in which women are portrayed in the fairy tale. In the movie, there is one nasty stepsister and a kind one. Danielle's stepsisters are Marguerite (Megan Dodd), the snobby sister with the golden hair and good looks, who only wants to go to the dances to marry the prince and relies on men for money and security but not affection, and the more lovable Jacqueline (Melanie Lynskey), a gentle and sweet girl who is not treated much better than Danielle - and berated about her weight. Jacqueline has a more complicated role as the sister who does not seem to belong. She is more defiant towards her mother and more sympathetic to Danielle. The movie changes our view of the stepmother. Rodmilla (Anjelica Huston) marries a man who brings her to a new world, then promptly dies of a heart attack and abandons her. Now she is all alone with a household which she should run singlehandedly and is left with three girls to raise, one of which is not even her own. She is stern, but her sternness is reasonable. She is desperate to give her daughter the best she can, although she manages to neglect the other two. The audience can almost sympathize with her. But it is only because she is a true-to-life character. Had she been a caricature-like figure like Cinderella's stepmother in the Disney version, no one would have sympathized at all. Of course, it does not excuse her actions, but it explains her. She does victimize Danielle, but she and her daughters are themselves victims of a patriarchal society in which the true power is hardly ever wielded by women, so the only way available to her to is to rely on favors from one rich man to the next for the luxurious life she cannot otherwise afford. Zipes (2001) observes that in the movie the stepmother and the stepsister "are not the real villains in history though they may be portrayed as the villains in the film", but, "the real cads in history were men like Prince Henry and his successors, and the real heroines were never Cinderella-type young women, anxious to marry well" (p. 188). It is the patriarchy which controls the stepmother and the stepsister's lives and ultimately contributes to the development of their evil nature. Thus, fairy tales like Cinderella become part of a patriarchal literary tradition which seeks to undermine powerful and dominant women by portraying them as hateful, wicked and evil. As Hourihan (1997) explains:

[T]he major reason for strife between [women] is the nature of patriarchy itself, and it is this which is inscribed in the stories. The most obvious reason for such strife is the competition imposed upon women by their powerlessness. Where status, comfort and security, perhaps survival itself, depend upon being chosen and valued by men, women's natural enemies are each other. (pp. 201-202)

That is why in the movie the stepmother and the stepsister show such enmity towards Danielle, not because they are by nature really evil; they have been made evil and desperate, and they cannot have a relationship with Danielle other than hatred and rivalry. They also cannot have a healthy mother-daughter relationship with each other because all they have been focusing on are wealthy men and how they can benefit them. As Hourihan (1997) further observes:

[P]atriarchy poisons women's relationships with each other, especially those of mother and daughter, in a more profound way than this. When a mother has had to bend and deform her own nature to please men she is likely to try to shape her daughter in the same

way, partly because she genuinely believes this is necessary if her daughter is to secure a husband and partly because, somewhere in the darker corners of her being, she feels that, as she has had to suffer, all females should suffer likewise, even her own daughter. (p. 202)

In the movie the stepmother and stepsister are not the expected stereotypes. Although on the surface they appear to be the story's villains, they have a depth of character that defines their actions. They have much more complicated characteristics to simply be labeled as evil creatures. By looking at them as victims of the society and the situation they find themselves in, we can expect the audience to understand and sympathize with them. They are rounded, actual women with hopes and desires and dreams that they are struggling to achieve in a fairy tale world where true equality between the sexes is still a fair way off.

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