

# Cruella: A Deep Psychological Analysis

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## Abstract

The paper analyses the film *Cruella* (directed by Craig Gillespie). The film offers a captivating portrayal of a complex character in the form of Estella, who metamorphoses into the iconic Cruella de Vil. This comprehensive analysis explores the intricate psychological aspects, character development, and the role of colour psychology within the film. *Cruella* deftly navigates the paradoxical nature of human beings, who harbour both virtuous and malevolent aspects. Drawing upon psychological theories of motivation, it delves into the driving forces behind Estella's transformation into Cruella. The character development of Cruella is a central focus, tracking her journey from a good-natured, introverted Estella to the audacious and rebellious Cruella. Notably, her evolution is catalysed by the pursuit of revenge, resulting in a shift from reserved behaviour to ambition, risk-taking, and creative self-expression. The interplay of fashion in Cruella's transformation signifies a compelling aspect of her character development. Exploring the realm of psychology, the film masterfully depicts the concept of dual identity and dissociation. Cruella's distinct personas, motivation through revenge, narcissism, defence mechanisms, ego development, and the impact of trauma are all facets of her rich psychological landscape. Her creative expression is portrayed as a cathartic outlet, while the audience is invited to engage on a profound psychological level. The resolution of Cruella's character journey serves as a psychological denouement, symbolizing her self-acceptance and balance. *Cruella* captivates its audience by showcasing the blurred lines between love and hate, presenting them as psychological mechanisms intertwined with the characters' identities. The ethical implications of these emotions are thoughtfully explored, adding depth to the narrative.

**Keywords:** Cruella; character development; psychology; colour symbolism

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## Introduction

The paradoxical nature of human beings invariably introduces a certain level of complexity into any discourse concerning them (Suryosumunar, 2019). From the inception of life to its culmination, each human endeavours to reconcile their dual nature, encompassing both virtuous and malevolent aspects (Feist & Feist, 2006). In their article, Revelle and Scherer posit that individuals are influenced by and evaluated against societal norms and standards, as well as their own aspirations,

as everyone requires their individual ‘desires’ for success in life. According to Jung, self-realization is the ultimate and imperative goal in our existence, attainable by each individual. Human nature is dynamic; our patterns emanate not only from our childhood and adult experiences but also from the ancestral experiences preserved in the collective unconscious, constituting the history of our species (Schultz & Schultz, 2009).

Psychological aspects are intricately entwined with the personality and behaviour exhibited by individuals, whether in a cinematic setting or in the realm of everyday life. These psychological phenomena are closely linked to an individual’s character and their behavioural patterns. Psychology plays a profound role in shaping a person’s personality and also significantly impacts their actions and motivations. This study is geared towards delving deeper into the ways in which psychological aspects can mould an individual’s character in the real world.

As Benhardt (1953) postulated, all human behaviours or actions are driven by a rationale known as human motivation. Benhardt further delineated five theories of motivation that elucidate why individuals undertake certain actions. These theories encompass:

- Aspects of Organic Needs or Appetites
- Aspects of Desires
- Emotions as Motivators
- Feelings and Attitudes as Motives
- The Motives Arising from Social Factors

## Characterization

Characters in literature and fiction often diverge from the expectations of audiences or readers. However, this incongruity in literary works has not been a cause for concern. Edward Jones has pointed out that characters in fiction are entities that can contribute to the narrative in diverse ways (Jones, 1968). Thus, it can be asserted that characters have the flexibility to enter and drive the plot in various ways, leaving no one entirely right or completely wrong. Characters reside in the “grey” areas of moral ambiguity.

The objective of character portrayal in fiction or literary works is to convey the best moral values and provide instruction to audiences and readers. This necessitates the creation of characters, each of whom possesses their own unique traits and takes actions that they perceive as right (or that the author deems appropriate). Pritchard also suggests that a character is an entity defined by their habitual behaviour (Wulandari, 2015). This aspect can be referred to as the characterization of the characters within the story. Characterization of a character in a movie holds the power to sway the audience’s perception. When characterization leans toward the negative, there’s a likelihood that we may develop aversion for the character, and conversely, positive characterization can foster a sense of affinity. Nevertheless, this is precisely the intention behind crafting characterizations – to render the character credible and ensure that the audience doesn’t remain entirely indifferent

toward the overall character (Petrie & Boggs, 2012). The conflict theory proposed by Petrie & Boggs and Kenney also finds application in the analysis of how characters like Cruella or Estella develop their traits and personalities as a consequence of the conflicts they confront, whether they are internal or external in nature. This theory aids in dissecting the conflicts that drive the development of these characters.

Petrie & Boggs (2012) put forth several character variations prevalent in movies, including stock and stereotype characters, static and dynamic (developing) characters, and flat and round characters. According to Petrie & Boggs, character development, or the evolution of a character, is triggered by specific events within the plot, whether internal or external. These events lead to significant changes in a character's personality, attitude, or outlook on life as a direct result of the story's unfolding action (Petrie & Boggs, 2012).

### **Character development of Cruella/Estella**

**From Estella to Cruella:** At the beginning of the movie, Estella is portrayed as a young girl with a penchant for mischief, but she is fundamentally good-natured and introverted. As the narrative progresses, she transitions into her alter ego, Cruella, a flamboyant and rebellious fashion icon. The shift from Estella to Cruella is marked by changes in her appearance, behaviour, and attitude.

**The Transformation at the Black-and-White Ball:** A significant turning point in Cruella's character development occurs at the Black-and-White Ball. Here, she confronts the Baroness and reveals her true identity, adopting the persona of Cruella. This moment is pivotal in defining her character and motivating her actions throughout the film.

**Motivated by Revenge:** Cruella's character development is strongly motivated by her desire for revenge against the Baroness, who she believes is responsible for her mother's death. This desire for vengeance propels her transformation into a bold and cunning figure, willing to go to great lengths to expose the truth.

**Conflict and Ambition:** Her character development is characterized by a growing sense of ambition and an increasing willingness to challenge the status quo. Her conflicts with the Baroness, along with her own determination, result in a personality shift that embraces audacity, creativity, and risk-taking.

**Fashion as an Expression of Character:** Cruella's love for fashion plays a pivotal role in her character development. Her extravagant and daring fashion choices reflect her evolving personality. Her creations and fashion shows become a means of expressing her unique style and personality.

**Identity and Self-Discovery:** As Cruella, Estella embarks on a journey of self-discovery and identity exploration. Her character development is closely tied to her quest to unearth the truth about her past and uncover her true self.

**Resolution and Integration:** Towards the film's conclusion, Cruella comes to terms with both her Estella and Cruella personas. Her character development leads to a resolution where she reconciles her different sides, highlighting the importance of embracing one's complexity.

## Psychological aspects

**Dual Identity and Dissociation:** Cruella's dual identity is a finely crafted representation of dissociation. She compartmentalizes her personas to such an extent that they have distinct mannerisms, clothing, and even voices. This illustrates the psychological complexity of managing dual identities.

**Motivation through Revenge:** Cruella's motivation for revenge is deeply rooted in her psychological makeup. Her desire for justice and vengeance is an intricate blend of grief, anger, and the need to expose the truth. This multifaceted motivation highlights the layers of her psychological turmoil.

**Narcissism and Self-Image:** The film portrays Cruella's narcissism with subtlety. Her fixation on extravagant fashion, desire for recognition, and manipulation of the media all underscore her narcissistic tendencies. This psychological trait is a result of her deep-seated insecurities and need for validation.

**Defence Mechanisms:** Cruella employs an array of defence mechanisms, and their interplay forms a complex psychological landscape. Her use of sublimation to channel her emotional distress into creativity, projection to attribute her vulnerabilities to others, and even humour as a defence against pain all showcase her intricate psychological adaptation.

**Ego Development and Identity Crisis:** Cruella's journey aligns with Erikson's stages of psychosocial development. Her identity crisis is not a simple one but a multi-faceted exploration of self, encompassing questions of origin, self-acceptance, and self-expression. Her psychological evolution signifies the resolution of various identity conflicts.

**Impact of Trauma on Behaviour:** The film intricately illustrates how trauma shapes behaviour. Cruella's defiance, recklessness, and unapologetic attitude can be seen as both defence mechanisms and a psychological response to her traumatic past. Her character embodies the complexity of psychological adaptation to adversity.

**Creative Expression as Catharsis:** Cruella's creative expression is a psychological catharsis. Her artistic endeavours serve as a means to channel her emotional turmoil and express her true self. The fashion shows and designs she creates become a dynamic outlet for her psychological healing.

**Audience's Psychological Engagement:** The film's portrayal of Cruella's psychological complexity invites the audience to engage on a profound emotional and psychological level. Viewers can identify with her internal struggles, making the film not just a story but also a platform for psychological introspection and reflection.

**Resolution and Psychological Growth:** The resolution of Cruella's character journey is an intricately designed psychological denouement. Her ability to integrate her Estella and Cruella personas represents the culmination of her psychological growth. This resolution reflects the psychological concept of individuation, symbolizing her self-acceptance and balance.

## Dissociation of personality

In the film, Cruella's sudden transformation into a "bad and a little bit insane" character may appear abrupt and unreasonable. At one point, Jasper had thoughtfully secured a job for her at Liberty of London, and Estella, appearing in comely makeup and an auburn hairdo, was overwhelmed with joy. Estella seemed genuinely puzzled about why someone would do such a kind act for her. However, out of seemingly nowhere, she undergoes a drastic metamorphosis into Cruella de Vil. Her face is heavily adorned with makeup, she wields a cane, and she dons an all-leather outfit. This sudden shift leaves us wondering when she began prioritizing her own desires over those of others. Even when Jasper recognizes this change and voices his concerns, his pleas fall on deaf ears. It's almost as if Cruella is conveying the message, "Darling, no one cares". From a psychoanalytic perspective, Freud posited that well-intentioned parents could inadvertently find themselves in a relationship fraught with ambiguity, which often breeds feelings of anger and resentment in their children. In the case of Cruella's character, her persona seems to presuppose that emotions are, in some way, inherited. Through the lens of her traumatic past, symbolized by the imaginary envelope of her trauma, one can discern an unfiltered view of the division within her ego. Reitske Meganck's work, "Beyond the Impasse – Reflections on Dissociative Identity Disorder from a Freudian – Lacanian Perspective", sheds light on the conflict between identificatory layers, which can lead to the suppression of certain aspects of one's identity and the manifestation of symptoms within a more or less stable system. In a less stable system, this internal conflict may set the stage for a potentially more dramatic collapse of self-experience. The connection between trauma and dissociation, especially in individuals with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), is often rooted in early childhood interpersonal relationships, as suggested by Schimmenti and Caretti. Cruella's transformation can be seen as a manifestation of this internal conflict and the impact of early trauma on her psychological development. Her sudden shift from Estella to Cruella represents a dramatic struggle within her identificatory layers, leading to the emergence of a complex and multifaceted character.

Hate, as a complex emotional response, possesses the capacity to adapt and serve various psychological functions. Within the realm of psychoanalysis, attitudes and imaginations of both love and hatred can often operate in opposition to each other, eventually converging to create symptom and character compromise formations.

The question of whether hate can ever be warranted or appropriate raises a profound ethical inquiry. Some argue that there exists "a healthy hatred of scoundrels and terrible individuals and organizations", as articulated by Carlyle in 1850. In this context, hate can be viewed as a defence mechanism against forming connections with abusive entities or individuals, or it can be a reaction against overly dependent, same-sex, or incestuous love. Homophobia and misogyny, for example, can be seen as psychological defences aimed at preserving a dominant masculine identity by acting as a bulwark against femininity.

In the case of Cruella, her pursuit of revenge can be understood as an attempt to establish her identity in opposition to her cruel birthmother. This quest for revenge is a manifestation of her deep-seated hatred, which, in psychoanalytic terms, may serve as a screen for her unresolved grief and facilitate the gradual process of mourning, as described by Searles in 1962. This deep-seated hatred becomes a barrier for Estella to properly mourn the loss of her caring mother, Catherine.

Emily Beecham's portrayal of Catherine in the film adds layers to the character's complexity. Initially, Catherine is depicted as Estella/Cruella's dedicated mother, driven by a desire to ensure the best for her daughter. However, her approach of freezing Estella's distinct personality to protect her from her biological mother's influence raises questions about her integrity. One might even consider the unpredictability of bipolar disorder as a possible factor that influenced Catherine's decisions.

In conclusion, the interplay of love and hate, as well as their adaptation in response to various life circumstances, forms a central theme in the psychological exploration of characters like Cruella and Catherine. These emotions serve as critical elements in shaping their identities and actions throughout the film, showcasing the intricate psychological dynamics at play in their narratives.

### **Colour psychology aspect**

**Red:** Red is a dominant colour in the film, and it's closely associated with Cruella herself. This bold and attention-grabbing colour symbolizes her transformation into the infamous fashion designer. Her signature red dress and black and white hair are iconic in the world of fashion and serve as a representation of her rebellious and fierce personality.

**Black and White:** These classic colours are an integral part of Cruella's fashion style and her brand. They symbolize the duality within her character – the struggle between her good and evil sides. Her choice of black and white is also a nod to the original animated character and the Dalmatian dogs she becomes obsessed with.

**Punk Aesthetics:** The punk rock scene of the 1970s London is characterized by its vibrant and unconventional use of colours. Vivid hair dyes, leather jackets, and torn clothing are all part of this style. The punk aesthetic in the film incorporates bold and contrasting colours, like electric blue, neon green, and hot pink, which reflect the rebellious and anarchic spirit of the characters.

**Cruella's Transformation:** As the film progresses, Cruella's transformation is visually depicted through her changing wardrobe. Her early outfits are muted, primarily in black and white, reflecting her more reserved personality. However, as she embraces her Cruella persona, her outfits become increasingly flamboyant, incorporating vibrant colours and avant-garde designs. This change symbolizes her journey towards self-discovery and self-expression.

**Art and Couture:** The world of fashion and haute couture plays a significant role in the movie. The use of colours in the various fashion collections and runway shows reflects the creativity and artistry of the characters. Bright, bold, and unconventional colours are used to make a statement and push the boundaries of traditional fashion.

**The Baroness:** The character of the Baroness, a renowned fashion designer and Cruella's primary antagonist, is often associated with cool and muted colours, particularly icy blues and greys. These colours reflect her character's cold and ruthless nature, creating a stark contrast with Cruella's bold and fiery palette.

**Emotion and Symbolism:** Throughout the film, colours are used to convey emotions and symbolism. For instance, red often represents anger and determination, while blue may symbolize sadness or introspection. The film uses colour to help the audience understand the characters' motivations and internal conflicts.

## Good or bad type?

Cruella, as Estella, exhibits a remarkable talent for fashion design and an innate creativity. Her ability to conceptualize and craft avant-garde outfits sets her apart in the world of fashion. This talent is a positive trait that showcases her artistic potential. From a young age, Estella demonstrates independence and determination. She is not content with conformity and is driven to make a name for herself in the fashion industry, a trait that many may admire. Despite her tumultuous journey, Estella maintains a strong sense of loyalty to her friends, Horace and Jasper. Her unwavering loyalty and camaraderie with them reveal her capacity for genuine relationships and connection.

As Estella transforms into Cruella, her pursuit of success and vengeance leads her to employ deceit and manipulation. She fabricates elaborate schemes, sometimes at the expense of others, to achieve her goals. These actions raise moral questions about her methods. Cruella's obsession with exacting revenge on the Baroness, while driven by a desire for justice, becomes a consuming and vindictive force. Her single-minded focus on revenge leads her to cross ethical boundaries. Cruella's willingness to push the limits to succeed in the fashion world often results in ruthless actions. She is not hesitant to undermine others and even commit crimes to advance her career.

Cruella's character in the film is complex due to the interplay of these positive and negative attributes. Her positive qualities showcase her potential for redemption and transformation, while her negative traits exemplify the moral dilemmas she faces. The audience is left to grapple with the ethical ambiguity of her character, making her portrayal in the movie all the more intriguing and thought-provoking.

## Summary

The study provides a comprehensive analysis of the character of Cruella in the film "Cruella". It examines the character's attributes, behaviours, and transformation throughout the narrative, shedding light on the complex interplay of positive and negative traits that define her persona.

On the positive side, Cruella, initially known as Estella, is portrayed as an exceptionally talented fashion designer with innate creativity. Her ability to conceptualize

and craft avant-garde outfits sets her apart in the fashion world. Moreover, Estella exhibits independence and determination, refusing to conform to societal norms and driven by a relentless ambition to make a name for herself in the industry. Her unwavering loyalty to her friends, Horace and Jasper, further showcases her capacity for genuine relationships and connection.

Conversely, Cruella's character takes on a darker tone as she undergoes a transformation into her more flamboyant and rebellious persona. Her pursuit of success and vengeance leads her to employ deceit and manipulation as tools to achieve her goals. These actions often come at the expense of others and raise moral questions about her methods. Her obsession with exacting revenge on the Baroness becomes a consuming and vindictive force, leading her to cross ethical boundaries. Her single-minded focus on success in the fashion world results in ruthless actions, as she is willing to undermine others and even commit crimes to advance her career.

The study concludes by emphasizing the moral complexity of Cruella's character, as it blurs the lines between being a traditional "good" or "bad" character. This complexity invites the audience to grapple with the ethical ambiguity of her character, making her portrayal in the movie both intriguing and thought-provoking. The character of Cruella serves as a compelling exploration of the multifaceted nature of human behaviour and the choices individuals make when confronted with challenges and adversity.

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