



Female Ambition and Social Resistance in *Cruella* (2021): A Feminist and Psychogenic Analysis

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of women's struggle and ambition in Cruella (2021), directed by Craig Gillespie. The film portrays female ambition as a strategic response to systemic oppression and psychological constraint. Set in 1970s London, the narrative follows Estella, a talented orphan who confronts social marginalization and professional exploitation under the authoritarian control of the Baroness, a powerful fashion designer. In reclaiming her identity, Estella adopts the persona of Cruella and transforms her marginalization into a calculated pursuit of recognition and dominance within the fashion industry. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method, analyzing narrative and cinematographic elements, including dialogue, camera techniques, and lighting. The analysis is grounded in Lise Vogel's (2013) Social Reproduction Theory to explore structural factors shaping women's struggle, and Henry Murray's psychogenic needs theory as further developed by McAdams (2008) to categorize the protagonist's forms of ambition. The findings reveal that Estella's struggle emerges from both external forces—such as social bullying and institutional exploitation—and internal tensions involving identity suppression. In response, she channels ambition through three primary modes: achievement expressed through strategic disruption, exhibition through performative fashion spectacles, and recognition-seeking through symbolic rivalry. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that ambition operates not merely as personal desire but as a mechanism of resistance against patriarchal and exploitative power structures. Estella's transformation into Cruella signifies both social defiance and psychological self-assertion, highlighting ambition as a catalyst for autonomy and empowerment.

Keywords: *ambition, cruella, psychogenic needs, women's struggle*

INTRODUCTION

Women's struggle is a recurring phenomenon in social and cultural life, emerging as a response to gender-based injustices and restrictive social norms. Women are often placed in situations where they must conform to particular standards in order to gain acceptance or recognition. As a result, they frequently work harder to prove their competence and self-worth. Such pressure commonly arises from unequal power relations and competitive environments that position women at a disadvantage through resistance, rivalry, and unequal expectations. Importantly, these challenges do not arise solely from men; they may also stem from other women who hold positions of authority and inadvertently perpetuate oppressive systems. In this context, ambition becomes a strategic response that enables women to survive and assert their identity amid multidirectional pressures. Murray and McAdams (2008) describe ambition as a fundamental human need to overcome obstacles and achieve high standards in order to preserve self-esteem and maximize personal potential.

The concept of women's struggle has been examined through various theoretical perspectives that highlight the tension between individual agency and structural limitations. Vogel (2013, p. 2) emphasizes the relevance of Marxist analysis in understanding women's oppression, arguing that it is deeply embedded within social and economic systems. From this perspective, struggle emerges when women's efforts toward liberation confront systemic marginalization. Similarly, Tyson (2015, as cited in Augie, 2024) notes that gender inequality persists across all stages of life and restricts women's access to decision-making and leadership roles, particularly in professional and business contexts. This argument is further reinforced by Mulvey (1989, as cited in Chaudhuri, 2006), who contends that visual culture frequently positions women as objects of the gaze, thereby shaping female identity through dominant structures of power. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that women's struggle represents a conscious resistance against objectification and systemic limitation, aimed at reclaiming authority and recognition as equal subjects in society.

The film *Cruella* (2021), directed by Craig Gillespie, narrates the story of Estella, a highly talented fashion designer who survives on the streets of London with two young thieves following her mother's death. Despite her difficult circumstances, she continues to pursue her dream of becoming a designer. While working under the influential Baroness von Hellman, Estella experiences exploitation and later discovers that the Baroness was responsible for her mother's death. In response, she adopts a new identity as Cruella to challenge the Baroness publicly. Through a carefully orchestrated plan, she exposes the Baroness's crimes during a high-profile event. The confrontation culminates in the Baroness pushing Estella off a cliff; however, Estella survives by staging her death. The Baroness is subsequently arrested, and Estella reclaims power by assuming full control of the Baroness's wealth and legacy as Cruella de Vil.

This film was selected as the object of study because it presents a compelling representation of women's struggle within a competitive and hierarchical system. The narrative illustrates how a woman negotiates power, social expectations, and professional rivalry in order to overcome structural disadvantages. Estella's defining

strength lies in her intense ambition, which functions as both psychological motivation and strategic resistance. Her transformation from a marginalized individual into a dominant figure underscores ambition as a driving force in challenging oppressive structures.

This study aims to analyze *Cruella* (2021) to provide a comprehensive understanding of how women's struggle is represented in contemporary film. It seeks to contribute to literary and film studies by examining the relationship between ambition and character formation within a feminist framework. Specifically, the research focuses on how the protagonist's ambition shapes her identity and enables her to assert control within a high-pressure environment.

METHODS

Descriptive qualitative research was a scientific approach that prioritized the depth of meaning over statistical measurement. This method aimed to explore and explain the complex social phenomena found within a research object. As Moleong (2010, as cited in Naamy, 2019, p. 234) explained, the descriptive qualitative research method focused on data that consisted of words or pictures rather than numbers. This suggested that the study did not use mathematical formulas, but instead relied on the writer's ability to interpret and describe the data in detail. In this context, the writer collected and analyzed various elements such as dialogues, actions, and scenes to understand the inner experience of the research subject. Thus, this method was highly suitable for analyzing a movie because it allowed for a comprehensive interpretation of how a story was visually and narratively constructed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The *Cruella* movie is set in London in 2021. The narrative follows Estella, a gifted designer facing systemic oppression and professional exploitation by Baroness von Hellman. This struggle manifests through external factors, such as intellectual property theft, and internal psychological burdens of self-suppression. To overcome these barriers, the protagonist utilizes ambition as a strategic tool for empowerment. By examining the need for achievement, exhibition, and recognition, the analysis demonstrates how Estella dismantles exploitative structures to reclaim her authority and transform into the dominant figure, Cruella.

The Depiction of Women's Struggle in *Cruella* Movie (2021)

The protagonist faces multi-layered struggles that can be classified into external environmental pressures and internal psychological conflicts. These struggles reflect a series of challenges where her individuality is suppressed by social barriers and unfair treatment from authoritative figures. Consequently, Estella must navigate the tension between fulfilling societal expectations of being a 'good girl' and embracing her true, rebellious identity to survive.

External Factors of Women's Struggle

The external factors were seen in two events: She was mistreated by her manager, and she was intimidated by the Baroness. The first external factor of women's struggle is professional marginalization and workplace inequality, which can be seen when Estella's manager at Liberty London rejected her sewing talents and forced her to remain a low-level cleaning worker.

Figure 1

Estella is mistreated by her manager



Cruella [00:22:54], Craig Gillespie (Director), 2021

This scene is depicted through the professional barrier Estella faces at Liberty London. Despite her immense talent in fashion design, she is confined to menial labor as a cleaning worker. When Estella tries to offer her expertise by saying, "Sir, I just wanted to say, I really am a dab hand with a needle if Alterations could use anything" (Gillespie, 2021, 00:22:47), her manager immediately shuts her down, asking, "Why are you talking and not cleaning?" (Gillespie, 2021, 00:22:52). This scene illustrates how women's professional aspirations are often dismissed by those in power, where their actual skills are ignored in favor of keeping them in subordinate, invisible roles. The manager closing the door on her symbolizes the systemic gatekeeping that prevents talented women from advancing.

The use of a full shot focuses on the overall power dynamic within the office rather than just individual emotions. The frame shows the manager sitting comfortably in a position of authority, surrounded by an elegant and organized background of bookshelves and documents, which signified the prestige of the high-end department store.

The second external factor of women's struggle is the systemic exploitation and intellectual property theft carried out by an authority figure, as seen when the Baroness seized Estella's creative work and claimed it as her own.

Figure 2

The Baroness intimidates Estella



Cruella [01:10:42], Craig Gillespie (Director), 2021

The second external factor is the systemic exploitation and intellectual property theft by authority figures. The Baroness, as a symbol of the established elite, asserts absolute control over Estella's creativity. When Estella creates a unique design during her break, the Baroness does not praise her but rather claims ownership of it, stating, "Alleys, designs, people, their souls. Check your employment contract" (Gillespie, 2021, 01:10:37). By pinning Estella's "out of the box" design onto her own board as a "new signature piece," the Baroness effectively erases Estella's identity as an artist. This shows that the environment is not just competitive but predatory, where a woman's genius is often swallowed by those who have the power to claim it as their own.

The power imbalance between Estella and the Baroness reached a suffocating level in this scene, where the struggle shifted from physical labour to the theft of intellectual identity. The medium shot utilized here forced the spectator into an uncomfortably close proximity with the Baroness, highlighting her cold, predatory gaze as she confronted Estella about the designs she had been "hiding." The high-key lighting washed the room in a sterile, stark white tone, serving as a visual metaphor for the Baroness's clinical, heartless approach to her employees. In this brightly lit environment, there was nowhere for Estella to hide her talent or her frustration. The Baroness, dressed in a sharp, structured dark chocolate gown with an imposing headwrap, looked like a literal monument of power.

Internal Factors of Women's Struggle

The internal struggle involves the psychological burden of self-suppression and the mental conflict of hiding one's true nature to meet social expectations.

Figure 3

Estella is pressured to be good



Cruella [00:01:38], Craig Gillespie (Director), 2021

The scene used a medium close-up that effectively captured the contrast between Catherine's soft, concerned maternal expression and the subtle hesitation on young Estella's face, while the natural light from the outdoor setting provided a gentle warmth that masked the heavy psychological burden on the child's shoulders. This lighting reflected the mother's "good" intentions, yet visually, it highlighted the shadow of suppression Estella had to live under, reinforced by Catherine's modest coat, which represented the traditional path she wanted for her daughter.

This internal struggle occurred when Catherine initiated a psychological exercise to ensure Estella remained submissive by asking, "Hey, what do you say to Cruella when she tries to get the better of you?" (Gillespie, 2021, 00:01:36), a question that forced the

young girl to view her own strength and rebellious spirit as an unwanted enemy. Estella's mechanical response, "Thank you for coming, but you may go now" (Gillespie, 2021, 00:01:40), demonstrated that she had been trained to suppress her natural instincts, as if they were a guest who must be asked to leave. Catherine further solidified this internal cage by listing the rigid traits Estella must adopt, telling her to "be polite. And good. And friendly" (Gillespie, 2021, 00:01:52), which represented a deep internal struggle where Estella began to believe her true temperament was "bad." This psychological pressure was visually symbolized by the instruction to wear a hat to hide her distinctive hair, just as the "Estella" persona was meant to hide the "Cruella" spirit. By forcing Estella to suppress her true self, her mother created a fragmented psyche that stifled her ambition in a world demanding social conformity.

The Protagonist's Use of Ambition to Deal with Women's Struggle

The many struggles Estella faces as a woman are the main reason her ambition grows so strong. This ambition serves as a direct psychological response to systemic unfairness, where she realizes that conforming to societal standards only leads to further marginalization. According to Murray's theory, this drive is manifested through the needs for achievement, exhibition, and recognition, which allow her to effectively dismantle the Baroness's authority and establish her own dominance.

The Need for Achievement

The first form of ambition is the need for achievement, which refers to Cruella's drive to reach a high level of success and surpass the standards held by the Baroness in the fashion industry. This ambition is not merely a desire for fame, but a strategic effort to overcome the professional obstacles and systemic oppression she faced earlier.

Figure 5

Cruella's existence threatens the Baroness



Cruella [01:08:48], Craig Gillespie (Director), 2021

In this scene, the shift of power in the fashion world is clearly visible through the Baroness's growing anxiety. The director used a medium-long shot to show the Baroness in her luxurious office, surrounded by her staff and piles of fashion magazines. This shot is important because it doesn't just focus on her face, but also shows her frantic environment, a place that used to be calm and under her total control, but is now filled with the "noise" of Cruella's rising fame. The natural lighting coming from the large windows creates a realistic and cold atmosphere, emphasizing that the Baroness's fear is real and happening in broad daylight. The magazines scattered on the table are not

just paper; they represent Cruella's first major achievement in taking over the media's attention, which used to belong solely to the Baroness.

Cruella's ambition is realized when she successfully disrupts the Baroness's dominance in the fashion world. The Baroness's frustration becomes evident as she realizes she is losing her grip on the industry, complaining, "And this Cruella person is everywhere" (Gillespie, 2021, 01:08:52). Cruella's achievement is not merely about making clothes; it is about proving her superiority over the person who once oppressed her. As the Baroness desperately yells, "I want ideas" (Gillespie, 2021, 01:08:49), it becomes clear that Cruella has stripped her of her creative authority. This achievement validates Cruella's struggle, proving that her talent is a force capable of dismantling the old, exploitative hierarchy.

The Need for Exhibition

The need for exhibition involves the desire to be seen, to make an impact, and to use dramatic display as a form of social and professional rebellion against those who seek to marginalize her. The event that shows Cruella's need for exhibition is her dramatic entrance at the Baroness's Black and White Ball, where she uses her appearance to command attention and challenge the existing social order.

Figure 6

Cruella introduces herself as a new rival



Cruella [00:52:36], Craig Gillespie (Director), 2021

The scene uses a medium shot to focus on Cruella's confident movements and her bold facial expressions, making the spectator feel her power as she stands right in front of her enemy. The practical lighting from the party's chandeliers and the fire from her transforming dress create a glowing, theatrical effect that makes her look like a goddess of rebellion. Cruella's decision to wear a bright red gown is a brilliant move of "exhibition." In a room where everyone else is wearing black or white, the red color stands out as a symbol of courage, anger, and passion.

Cruella uses the "Black and White Ball" as a stage to perform her rebellion. Her dramatic entrance in a red gown, a color that defies the Baroness's strict dress code, is a calculated act of exhibition. When the Baroness remarks that her face looks "vaguely familiar," Cruella confidently retorts, "I look stunning. I don't know about familiar, darling" (Gillespie, 2021, 00:52:34). This moment is crucial because Cruella is no longer hiding in the shadows; she is demanding to be the center of attention. By stating, "I fixed it" regarding the dress, she publicly reclaims her stolen talent, using this exhibition to show the world that she is the true genius behind the designs.

The Need for Recognition

The need for recognition represents the final stage of Estella's ambition, where she seeks formal acknowledgement for her creative accomplishments and the validation of her true identity. According to Murray's theory, this need is driven by the desire to be known and to receive praise for one's unique achievements, moving beyond mere success to achieving a lasting legacy.

Figure 7

The Baroness's manipulative acknowledgment of Estella



Cruella [01:59:15], Craig Gillespie (Director), 2021

In a climactic moment, the Baroness is forced to admit that Cruella is her equal. She acknowledges Cruella's genius, stating, "That you're so extraordinary. Of course, you're mine. I've longed for someone in my life who was as good as me" (Gillespie, 2021, 01:59:15). Although this recognition is poisoned by the Baroness's attempt to kill her, it remains the ultimate validation of Cruella's talent. Cruella uses this private admission to trap the Baroness, turning it into a public downfall and solidifying her own legacy as the new fashion ruler.

This scene takes place at the edge of Hellman Hall's cliff, accompanied by a tragic and dramatic non-diegetic sound that hints at a dark ending. The director uses an over-the-shoulder shot to create an intimate but intense atmosphere, forcing the spectator to focus on the cold emotions between them. The hard lighting creates sharp shadows on the Baroness's face, emphasizing her mysterious and heartless nature. Although the scene feels serious and cold with cool colour tones (dark blue and black), the eye-level shot keeps the two characters at the same level, showing that Cruella is no longer just a servant but a rival equal to the Baroness. The Baroness's dress, made of metallic grey fabric that looks like armor, perfectly represents her lack of emotional warmth and her obsession with control.

CONCLUSION

Cruella's experience reveals that women's struggle is a complex burden shaped by both external oppression and internal psychological pressure. The constant rejection from society for being "different," the professional marginalization in the workplace, and the blatant theft of her creative work by an authority figure created a hostile environment that tried to silence her. This was made worse by the internal struggle of suppressing her true self to meet her mother's "good girl" standards; however, these challenges ultimately became the catalyst for her to stop subverting her identity and start embracing her true self as a means of survival.

Ambition was the primary tool Cruella used to reclaim her power and dismantle the systems of restraint. Through a relentless need for achievement, she transitioned from a victim into a rival capable of sabotaging and surpassing her oppressor's legacy. Her need for exhibition allowed her to transform visibility into a form of protest, using bold, unconventional fashion to command public attention and challenge elite norms. By finally securing recognition from her greatest enemy, she validated her own genius and secured her position as a leader in her field, proving that her self-worth no longer depended on anyone else's permission.

This concludes that, for women facing systemic barriers, ambition is a necessary response to inequality rather than merely a personal desire. Cruella's transformation proves that strategic success can overcome both physical and psychological limitations, showing that embracing one's authentic power is the ultimate path to independence in a world that often hides women's potential.

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