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<p style="text-align:center">Essay #4: Cinderella and Society Research Paper</p>

Wicked. Evil. These are the adjectives that are synonymous with stepmother. Throughout the centuries, many fairy tales feature a stepmother, but none are as infamous as the stepmother in "Cinderella" stories. From Andy Tennant's *Ever After: A Cinderella Story* (1998) to Kenneth Branagh's *Cinderella* (2015), the villainess is always portrayed as a cold, calculating woman, who mistreats the biological daughter of her second husband, while doting on her two plain and unremarkable daughters. Although stepmothers have existed throughout history in various cultures around the world, negative connotations of the word "step" have been in place since the 1400s (qtd. in Dainton 93). The evil stepmother archetype continues today, especially in the American culture, where divorce and other factors have led to an increase in remarriages, resulting in blended families; in fact, one in six American children now live in a household consisting of either a stepparent, a stepsibling, and/or a half-sibling ("Parenting in America" par. 17). The inevitability of having a stepmother has become a driving force behind the continued myth and misconceptions of the stepmother role – namely, what makes her so evil – that is so pervasive in mainstream American culture.

All literary works are infused with physical structures, such as the narrative format, and non-physical structures, like social values and beliefs, and the "Cinderella" fairy tale is no exception. Literary structuralists believe that these compositions are what help shape and influence cultures across the world, keeping the stories timeless and applicable, even in the 21st

century. They assert that in each literary work, there are "underlying elements in culture and literature that can be connected" so that "general conclusions about the individual works" can be formed and shared among "all human experiences" ("Structuralism and Semiotics (1920s-present)" par. 1, 3). As such, generations of little girls have interpreted the "Cinderella" story to be one about a beautiful young girl who dreams of marrying a prince, as evident by the countless number of said girls dressed as princesses, while waiting for her Prince Charming. However, across all cultures, including the American one, the biggest take-away from the "Cinderella" narrative is the role of the stepmother. Despite "Cinderella" being a fairy tale, an invented story with magical beings and elements, and targeting mostly children and encompassing morals and values to be learned, Merriam-Webster dictionary defines fairy tales as made-up stories created to mislead people ("fairy tale"). As such, "fairy tales may shape the way children, and especially little girls, understand the world" and in turn, influence the way children and society portray the role of the stepmother (Garber par. 2). With introductions to the stepmother through these beloved fairy tales, children and adults alike just accept the fact that the stepmother is evil; no one seeks to question it. Therefore, it is these structures in the "Cinderella" stories that contribute to the myth and misconceptions about the stepmother.

Scholars have chronicled the existence of the evil stepmother in just about every folktale around the world (Dainton 93). Hence, stepmothers exist not just in these stories, but in real life as remarriages are constructed from either the death of a spouse or from a divorce. In fact, the word "stepfamily has its roots in the Old English word 'steop,' which means loss," since "most stepfamilies were formed in the wake of grief" (Cummins par. 9). Prior to the 1900s, infections and complications related to childbirth have led to early maternal deaths (par. 9). In 17th century Europe, throughout London and other metropolitan areas, maternal death accounts for one in

every forty births (Schwartz 1487). With many women dying in childbirth, the surviving

husband has no choice, but to find another wife to help him with childcare and other household

duties. Consequently, Cinderella's father's only option is to remarry. Likewise, the Baroness

Rodmilla de Ghent in Tennant's *Ever After* (1998), being a widow with two daughters, needs

another man to ensure her and her children's survival and financial security. Hence, a remarriage

is more of a business proposition with mutual benefits. Furthermore, as a product of Renaissance

Europe, Baroness de Ghent lives in a world dominated by men, where regardless of social class

and education level, the only career for a woman was to get married, even if it means marrying a

widower with children from a previous union. It is this financial pressure to remarry quickly,

especially following the death of a spouse, that has led to marriages that are often mismatched –

at least in today's standards (Nouri 23). Husbands and their new wives often differ not just in

age, but in compatibility as well, and biological children at the time often end up with

stepmothers they hardly know.

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, the children's definition of a stepmother is

"the wife of someone's parent after the death or divorce of his or her natural or legal mother"

("stepmother"). Studies have shown that the role of the stepmother is often more complicated

and challenging than the role of the stepfather, leading to unrealistic expectations that have

contributed to the evil stepmother myth and the myth of instant love (Recker par. 1). The

stepmother, being a woman, "is supposed to take on a motherly role – taking care of children and

housework – but the stepmother role expects that she remain more distant," leading to

contradictions about her role (par. 1). Biological children often view the stepmother as a threat to

their own birth mother and as thus, will treat their stepmother with negative feelings and

resentment (par. 1). If the stepmother steps back, in fear of rejection from the biological child,

then she is portrayed as uncaring and, in the eyes of the stepchild, as evil. In addition, if both parents don't agree on methods of disciplining the children or if the biological father fails to be responsible for his children's actions, then "this sets the stage for the stepmother to become the 'evil' stepmother," as she will often end up taking on the role of the disciplinarian (par. 4). Alternatively, if the stepmother presents herself as more loving and caring towards the stepchild, then the stepchild and others will perceive her as trying to replace the child's biological mother – especially, if the biological mother is still alive and present in the child's life. To that end, there seems to be no way to get around the evil stepmother role.

Another contribution to the misconceptions about stepmothers is the myth of instant love. This myth is predominantly based on cultural expectations of women and how as mothers, they are expected to assimilate seamlessly into the role of motherhood (Dainton 93-94). In Branagh's *Cinderella* (2015), Lady Tremaine becomes, by default, the replacement mother figure for the title character Ella, with society expecting that "remarriage in and of itself creates an instant family" and that the stepmother "should (and will) automatically love [her] stepchildren" because "mothering is assumed to come naturally and easily" (Dainton 94). Society expects the new stepmother to adapt to her new family right away, and as a woman, expects her to have that maternal instinct and motherly love, without considering the time it takes to develop and settle into that maternal role. Again, if the stepmother doesn't appear to love her stepchild at first sight, then she is seen as evil and unloving. Often than not, instant love does not happen to both parties; stepmothers are "surprised and dismayed when they don't feel immediate love for their stepchildren" and in turn, the "stepchildren are often afraid, unsure, and uncomfortable with the changes in the family" and may react "by being surly and resentful" (Dainton 94). As a result, the stepmother ends up being very ambivalent in her role as a stepparent, leading to the double

bind situation of if she does it, she is evil and if she does not do it, she is still evil. It is these cultural expectations of the role of the stepmother that have set these women up to be portrayed as a villainess.

Feminist theories offer a different take on what makes a stepmother evil. They argue that the core of "Cinderella" stories is really about the treachery of women and how in a patriarchal society, women are trained to be submissive and do not have the ability to act freely and think for themselves (Nouri 24). These theories claim that "male and female characters are portrayed [differently] in fairy tales" and as thus, "male power is portrayed as positive while female power is viewed as negative," leading to "any strong female characters that do have power are seen as wicked and evil, like the stepmother, who is manipulative and deceitful" (Nouri 24). The rise of female power can be observed in *Ever After*, where shortly after her remarriage, the Baroness' husband has a heart attack and dies. As he lays dying on the road by the entrance of his estate, both the Baroness and her stepdaughter, Danielle, are at his side. Instead of looking at both his new wife and his daughter, Danielle's father only has eyes for her – eyes that convey love, loss, and regret. In this scene, Tennant uses pathos to appeal to the audience the extent of the Baroness' emotions, which includes surprise, sadness, jealousy, and ultimately, hatred. Without a doubt, this part of the story is the start of "female hatred, female sabotage, and female jealousy," and the rise of the Baroness' power, as a household without any male figures now becomes a hunting ground to find another male to ensure their survival (Nouri 24). It is now up to the Baroness to make sure that her daughters marry well and secure their future, while eliminating the competition, which is Danielle. In essence, it is this very male-dominated society that creates and contributes to the rivalry among women for the competition of resources, and the development of the evil stepmother role.

In the Western world, including the United States, most European countries, Australia, and New Zealand, the number of non-traditional families outnumber traditional ones ("Marriage, Family, and Stepfamily Statistics" par. 1). Hence, the American culture reflects the high rates of marriages and divorces, and its pressure on women and their role as stepmothers. Data for 2021 suggest "Americans marry, divorce, and cohabit more than any Western society" and among all the women in the United States, "10%...have had three or more marriages, divorces, or cohabiting partners…by age 35" ("Marriage" par. 20). Since more Americans live in stepfamilies than in nuclear families, the role of the stepmother is more prominent than ever, with many women becoming stepmothers often in their first marriage (par. 5). These women marry men that automatically come with children and there is no honeymoon period for the women to properly enjoy their marriage before the couple can entertain the idea of having a child together (Recker par. 6). Therefore, this becomes a reflection of society's pressure on women to have that maternal instinct and the instant love for their stepchildren. In terms of traditional gender roles, which is also an important aspect of "Cinderella" stories, women are expected to stay home and take care of the children while men are considered the breadwinners and go to work. These traditional gender roles "wreak havoc on stepfamilies" and "they also set stepmothers up to fail," with everyone "[having] a role to play in setting the trap" (Ladogna par. 2). Usually, after a divorce, the father will take on more roles than his traditional male gender role in that he may cook for the children, pick them up from school, help them with homework, style his daughter's hair, etc. Once a man is remarried, society conditions him to revert to his traditional male gender role as the breadwinner and he will expect his new wife to take on the traditional female gender role of caretaking. This is certainly the case in *Ever After* where once Danielle's father brings home his new wife, he leaves for his business travels almost immediately and expects the

Baroness de Ghent to take care of the household. What society and the American culture do not realize is that the stepmother is often left unsure of her role in this remarriage. Parenting experts believe

> It is this fear of being branded "wicked" [that] leads [the stepmother] to take a backseat role in parenting, striving to act as a friend and shower her stepchildren with endless love and generosity rather than establishing herself as a respected authority figure…this often leads to her staying quiet as she's subject to hostility, isolation, verbal and even physical abuse in her own home. (Maddeaux par. 8)

As a result, everyone in the family is responsible for this trap that wreaks havoc on stepfamilies and setting up the stepmother to be evil, from the children who suddenly become close to their father while he temporarily takes on both parenting roles following a divorce to the ex-wife feeling jealous that the stepmother is stealing her mothering role to the husband who now expects his new wife to take on the caretaking role that he can finally relinquish. Ultimately, it is the American culture that sets up the stepmother (and women) to fail, even before she can adapt and adjust to her role in her new family.

In recent decades, the evil stepmother trope has seen revisions in several mainstream media. Among recent films, Branagh's *Cinderella* has given the stepmother a backstory, one in which allows the audience a chance to understand and sympathize with her. In this version of the timeless fairy tale, the "nuance [actress] [Cate] Blanchett brings to the role" of Lady Tremaine, "the defining descriptor is *cruel*…it is the direct result of the cruelties her own life has heaped upon her. And those, in turn, are the direct result of her being a woman" (Garber par. 5). Besides the backstory, Branagh also employs the use of pathos to evoke the audience's emotions by portraying that Lady Tremaine is human after all. By default, she is not wicked or evil, but by

being a woman of her times in a male-dominated world, Lady Tremaine falls victim to the rules

and expectations set forth by a patriarchal society and as such, reacts accordingly. As she

explains to Ella

> [I] had a husband [I] loved once…and [we] had two daughters together. But then: [my]
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> husband died. [I] was left to fend for [myself] in a world that has little appreciation for
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> single mothers of, no less, daughters. So [I] did what [I] had to do, out of social and
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> economic necessity: [I] married again. (Garber par. 5).

In this second marriage, Lady Tremaine does not marry for love. Instead, she marries a man out

of necessity, and it is to a man who is still mourning his dead wife and who obviously loves his

daughter very, very much. With her new husband preferring his daughter's company over hers,

Lady Tremaine's "desperation gave way to jealousy; then, when [Ella's] father died, hope gave

way to hatred" (Garber par. 6). In the scene where Lady Tremaine locks up Ella after discovering

that she is the mystery princess at the ball, Ella asks her, "Why are you so cruel?" (Weitz 35).

Her response is, "Because you are young, and innocent, and good…and I…" (Weitz 35). Lady

Tremaine trails off and the audience realizes that her cruelty is the result of not so much her

character, but the way her patriarchal society has raised, shaped, and hardened her. While Ella

faces life's challenges with courage and kindness, Lady Tremaine chooses to face hers with

cruelty – a defense mechanism that helps shield her from further heartbreak and setbacks.

In recent years, America's high divorce and marriage rates have led to an increase in

stepfamilies. As a result, more and more children live in households with a stepmother. Since

fairy tales portraying evil stepmothers have been told to children for generations, it is inevitable

that the evil stepmother role has been ingrained in the American culture for decades. Children

and adults alike fall into the self-fulfilling prophecy where they assume a stepmother is

automatically a wicked woman, where she hates her stepchildren, mistreats them, and will only care for her own children. Despite their best efforts, stepmothers find themselves caught in that ambiguous role in which she is neither loving nor unloving, and unsure of her part in her new family. Even though recent films, such as Branagh's *Cinderella*, have reflected the times and given the stepmother a backstory to make her seem more human, much work still needs to be done to deconstruct the evil stepmother myth. Instead of having unrealistic expectations of what a stepmother should and should not do, American culture can work towards realizing that stepmothers "often serve as the glue that holds a family together after a divorce, providing essential support to children, improving family function, and smoothing potentially tough transitions" (Maddeaux par. 9). A stepmother, therefore, can also be a friend, a mediator, and a confidante. She is not a mother replacement, but a bonus mom.

Word count: 2838

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