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**Cinderella Reimagined: A Feminist Analysis of Empowerment
and Agency in Classic Tale and Contemporary Film Adaptations**

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Master's Degree in Literature and Civilisation*

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Dedications

Great thanks to our family and friends for their support every second.

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Abstract

A comparative feminist study of the classic "Cinderella" by Charles Perrault, the movie "Cinderella: Ever After," and the 2021 adaptation of the same name is presented in this dissertation. The study explores how the Cinderella story has changed over time and how contemporary retellings either question or reinforce developed gender roles by placing each version within its historical and cultural context. In order to evaluate how femininity, agency, and independence are portrayed in the three works, the study makes use of feminist literary theory.

According to the research, Perrault's original story maintains traditional gender standards and idealises submissive femininity, but modern versions place a greater emphasis on female autonomy and self-determination. Both "Cinderella: Ever After" and "Cinderella" (2021) retell the story of the heroine, emphasising empowerment and self-actualisation above obedience and purity. In order to reflect changing cultural views on women's roles, these adaptations reimagine supporting characters and story outcomes, introducing complex portrayals of gender.

By providing an analytical examination of the thematic, structural, and stylistic elements of each rendition, the dissertation advances the discipline and draws attention to how the Cinderella tale functions as a cultural mirror for evolving feminist discourses. Important conclusions show that contemporary retellings broaden the genre's interpretative potential by challenging conventional tropes and addressing current discussions about gender equality. This piece highlights the timeless value of fairy tales in literary and cultural studies by showing how critical discourse about identity, agency, and social change may be generated by reimagining classic works.

Keywords: Cinderella, Feminism, Adaptation, Gender, Cinematic Interpretation, Social Change.

Résumé

Cette thèse présente une étude féministe comparative du classique « Cendrillon » de Charles Perrault, du film « Cendrillon et la fin des temps » et de l'adaptation du même nom en 2021. L'étude explore l'évolution de l'histoire de Cendrillon au fil du temps et la manière dont les adaptations contemporaines remettent en question ou renforcent les rôles de genre établis, en replaçant chaque version dans son contexte historique et culturel. Afin d'évaluer la représentation de la féminité, de l'action et de l'indépendance dans les trois œuvres, l'étude s'appuie sur la théorie littéraire féministe.

Selon la recherche, l'histoire originale de Perrault conserve les normes de genre traditionnelles et idéalise la féminité soumise, tandis que les versions modernes accordent une plus grande importance à l'autonomie et à l'autodétermination féminines. « Cendrillon et la fin des temps » et « Cendrillon » (2021) reprennent l'histoire de l'héroïne, privilégiant l'autonomisation et l'épanouissement personnel plutôt que l'obéissance et la pureté. Afin de refléter l'évolution des perceptions culturelles sur le rôle des femmes, ces adaptations réinventent les personnages secondaires et les dénouements narratifs, introduisant des représentations complexes du genre.

En proposant une analyse des éléments thématiques, structurels et stylistiques de chaque interprétation, la thèse fait progresser la discipline et met en lumière la manière dont le conte de Cendrillon fonctionne comme un miroir culturel de l'évolution des discours féministes. Des conclusions importantes montrent que les adaptations contemporaines élargissent le potentiel interprétatif du genre en remettant en question les tropes conventionnels et en abordant les débats actuels sur l'égalité des sexes. Cet article souligne la valeur intemporelle des contes de fées dans les études littéraires et culturelles en montrant comment la réinvention d'œuvres classiques peut générer un discours critique sur l'identité, l'action et le changement social.

Mots-clés : Cendrillon, Féminisme, Adaptation, Genre, Interprétation cinématographique, Changement social.

التلخيص

تُقدّم هذه الأطروحة دراسة نسوية مقارنة لقصة "سندريلا" الكلاسيكية لشارل بيرو، وفيلم "سندريلا: إلى الأبد"، والنسخة المُقتبسة التي تحمل الاسم نفسه الصادرة عام ٢٠٢١. تستكشف الدراسة كيف تغيرت قصة "سندريلا" بمرور الوقت، وكيف تُشكك الروايات المُعاصرة في الأدوار الجندرية المُتطورة أو تُعززها من خلال وضع كل نسخة في سياقها التاريخي والثقافي. لتقييم كيفية تصوير الأنوثة والفاعلية والاستقلالية في الأعمال الثلاثة، تستعين الدراسة بالنظرية الأدبية النسوية

وفقًا للبحث، تُحافظ قصة بيرو الأصلية على المعايير الجندرية التقليدية وتُمدّد الأنوثة الخاضعة، لكن النسخ الحديثة تُركّز بشكل أكبر على استقلالية المرأة وتقرير مصيرها. يُعيد كلٌّ من "سندريلا: إلى الأبد" و"سندريلا" (٢٠٢١) سرد قصة البطلة، مُركّزًا على التمكين وتحقيق الذات فوق الطاعة والتهابة. لتعكس هذه التعديلات الرؤى الثقافية المتغيرة حول أدوار المرأة، تُعيد تصور الشخصيات الثانوية ونتائج القصة، مقدّمَةً تصوراتٍ معقّدة للجنس. ومن خلال تقديم دراسة تحليلية للعناصر الموضوعية والبنوية والأسلوبية لكل نسخة، تُطور هذه الأطروحة هذا التخصص وتُسلط الضوء على الطرق التي تُمثل بها قصة سندريلا امرأة ثقافيةً للخطابات النسوية المتطورة. وتُظهر الاستنتاجات المهمة أن إعادة السرد المُعاصرة تُوسع الإمكانات التفسيرية لهذا النوع الأدبي من خلال تحدي المجازات التقليدية ومعالجة النقاشات الحالية حول المساواة بين الجنسين. وتُسلط هذه المقالة الضوء على القيمة الخالدة للحكايات الخرافية في الدراسات الأدبية والثقافية من خلال إظهار كيف يُمكن توليد خطاب نقدي حول الهوية والفاعلية والتغيير الاجتماعي من خلال إعادة تصور الأعمال الكلاسيكية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سندريلا، النسوية، التكييف، الجنس، التفسير السينمائي، التغيير الاجتماعي

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General Introduction

Storytelling is an ancient form of art that has evolved through time, from oral traditions to written forms and multimedia, which reflect the cultural changes and technological development humankind has known. In ancient times, storytelling was based on oral tradition; storytellers used it not only for tales but also to transmit moral lessons, teaching, etc... Later on, around the 8th century BCE, ancient civilizations such as the Greeks, Sumerians, and Egyptians started to write their stories on clay tablets, papyrus, and other things, before writing systems started to appear. Among the first written works to be inscribed are the epic tales such as the “Epic of Gilgamesh”, “The Iliad” or “The Odyssey” that have marked recorded human history and literature as we now know it.

The printing press was introduced in the fifteenth century, making books even more available and affordable to the audience, as written stories became more popular than oral storytelling, which then led to the birth of new literary forms such as novels. In the 18th and 19th centuries, with the development of technology, films introduced multisensory storytelling to captivate much broader audiences all the more. Today, stories are told not only through films, but with the rise of the internet, stories are told through social media, broadcasts, and other platforms that succeed in instantly reaching audiences worldwide at the click of a button.

Beginning from oral traditions, tales with magical elements have evolved through time to be inscribed in classical manuscripts and gradually adapted to the silver screen, all stages reflecting cultural values and addressing moral lessons, reaching broader audiences in the given historical and socio-cultural contexts. As cinema evolved, fairy tale adaptations began to depict character development and life complexities that reflect the contexts in which they are set. At the same time, contemporary filmmakers reinterpret classic stories to reflect social

complexities and gender roles, such as “Cinderella” by Charles Perrault, titled *Cendrillon* or *La Petite Pantoufle de Verre*, published in 1697 as part of his collection “Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé” (Stories or Tales from Times Past) characterized by traditional folk elements (Perrault). Perrault’s tale influenced many reinterpretations such as “Cinderella: Ever After” 1998, directed by Andy Tennant, a romantic drama set in the Renaissance era in France with a strong narrative style that emphasized empowerment, and “Cinderella” 2021, directed by Kay Cannon, a contemporary musical adaptation characterized by its modern take on the beloved story. (Cannon 65)

Our motivation to work on this topic started with our interest in fairy tales and magic, especially Cinderella and how it was adapted into several films, each film characterized by differing elements, themes, and perspectives, which made us in turn, question how the traditional story of Cinderella differs from current adaptations and the reasons behind this change. This is why we found it interesting to examine different screen adaptations of the Cinderella fairytale to compare and extract the differing elements and the reason behind this change and evolution from the main folktale. The selected screen adaptations we will be working on are mainly “Ever After”, filmed in 1998, and as a more contemporary version, “Cinderella” starring the singer Camilla Cabello, filmed in 2021.

This research work is guided by three research questions, each addressed in a separate chapter:

1. How does the depiction of Cinderella differ from Perrault’s original story and the other adaptations?
2. What social values are reflected in the character dynamics between Cinderella and her antagonists in each version?

3. How do the different Cinderellas challenge traditional gender roles in these contemporary adaptations?

After doing a close reading of the original story and watching the films, we have reached these hypotheses:

First, it hypothesises that the character of Cinderella in Perrault's original story is presented as a passive character, whereas contemporary adaptations such as *Cinderella 2021* present her as a more independent and autonomous character who challenges oppression, showcasing the modern interpretation that reflects social values.

Second, it is predicted that the relationship between Cinderella and her antagonists, stepmother and stepsister, in Perrault's story is more tolerant, unlike the adaptations of *Cinderella Ever After* and *Cinderella 2021*, their relationships are more complicated.

Third, it is sought that Cinderella's contemporary adaptations challenge traditional gender roles. In *Cinderella's 2021* film, she is portrayed as a strong character who faces oppression and seeks independence and empowerment following her dream beyond marriage rather than waiting for the prince to marry her.

The focus of this research is on the comparative analysis of "Cinderella" by Charles Perrault and contemporary adaptations, examining the transformation of characterisations. We have divided the research work into three parts. The first chapter will deal with the origins of fairy tales, highlighting how oral tales have been adapted to written form throughout history. We will also provide how Cinderella's narrative style has been adapted in many ways across cultures, reflecting their social changes. In addition to a brief overview of the modern adaptations.

In the second chapter, we will start by introducing the feminist theory and an overview of its evolution. Focusing on the analysis of Perrault's representation of gender roles and how

the adaptations of Cinderella 1998 and 2021 explore femininity and character independence, challenging traditional gender roles. We will also critique how the modern reinterpretation of Cinderella 1998 and 2021 used elements that reinforce stereotypes about femininity.

The third chapter of the dissertation will be about the comparative analysis of Perrault's original story and the contemporary adaptations. Starting from the feminist analytical framework and how each film portrays femininity, highlighting character similarities and differences in each version, including how each text explores themes of identity and empowerment, in addition to the narrative structure of each version. Overall, this chapter will provide a detailed comparison between the versions.

To conclude, this research aims to provide a clear comparative study between the "Cinderella" tale of Charles Perrault and the two contemporary adaptations "Ever After" and "Cinderella" 2021, how each version depicts the Cinderella protagonist in the story and how she faced gender roles and social values. In addition to this research work format follow the seventh edition of the MLA Handbook.

Chapter One:

Cinderella: A Historical Overview and Evolution of the Tale

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, named The Historical Overview and Evolution, we will discuss the origins of Cinderella and how the story has developed from oral traditions into modern retellings across cultures and periods, highlighting how the story has evolved across different societies. In addition to some scholars' perspectives and criticisms.

The well-known fairy tale, Cinderella, originates from various cultural backgrounds and historical periods worldwide. From its earliest forms in ancient societies to its contemporary literary and cinematic versions, Cinderella's story has experienced huge evolution while maintaining its central themes of bravery, hope, and the pursuit of justice.

The way Cinderella has been portrayed over time has changed significantly, reflecting shifts in society. Many versions of the story appeared, including operas, ballets, musicals, and movies, all of which reflect modern cultural standards and perfections. Modern prospects of Cinderella have been extremely affected by Disney's animated masterpiece and its follow-up live-action productions, which frequently highlight themes of self-discovery and empowerment.

1.2 Definition and origins of fairytales in literature

Fairy tales are a unique literary genre distinguished by their moral messages, imaginative characters, and magical aspects. These fictional tales are set in a magical world, including archetypes like princesses, heroes, witches, and magical animals. The French author Madame d'Aulnoy popularised the word "fairy tale" in the late 17th century when she used it to refer to her collection of stories called *Contes de Fees*, published in 1697. (Ness)

Fairy tales historically originated from oral traditions and developed from folklore that is transmitted from one generation to the next. They frequently blur the boundaries between various storytelling styles by including aspects of myth and legend. Folklorists have pointed

out that myths, folk stories, and fairy tales are all part of preliterate civilisations' literature and cannot be clearly distinguished from one another. Fairy stories frequently end with a "happily ever after" and frequently have similar themes like miraculous transformations, journeys, and the victory of good over evil.

A marvellous element—something magical or supernatural that transforms the lives of the protagonists for the better—is one of the traits of fairy tales. For instance, the heroine of the fairy tale *Cinderella* can attend the royal ball and eventually finds love thanks to the fairy godmother's charms. Additionally, fairy tales frequently include straightforward characters with recognisable characteristics, which makes them suitable for children and simple to recount.

Literary fairy tales and traditional folk tales are the two main categories into which fairy tales have been divided. Literary fairy tales have been written by recognisable writers, but traditional folk stories have been passed down orally and modified over time. Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, published in 1836, and Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*, released in 1888, are two examples of literary fairy tales. The categorizing of fairy tales is made harder by the blend of oral and textual traditions, as many stories have been changed in both. The repeated themes of resilience, ethics, and transformation in diverse Cinderella and other classic tales show their internationality.

In short, fairy tales serve as an important genre within literature that mirrors cultural values and human experiences. Their origins in folklore focus attention on the importance of storytelling in creating societal norms and moral lessons. As they pursue to develop through adaptations in literature and media, fairy tales remain an essential part of our cultural heritage, captivating audiences with their timeless themes and enchanting narratives.

1.3 Historical context of Cinderella

Cinderella is a timeless folk tale that has been told for thousands of years across many cultures. It tells the story of a young woman who was mistreated by her stepfamily, and because of her inner beauty, she found her love. The story became known in Europe through versions like Charles Perrault and continues to inspire countless adaptations.

1.3.1 Origins of the Cinderella Story

The Cinderella story is a folk tale that evolved through a thousand years into many forms of stories across various cultures. The ancient oral version of Cinderella goes back to Egyptian origins, the story of Rhodopis was first recorded by the Greek geographer Strabo, 64 or 63 BC-c.24 AD in his geographical book 17(chapter 33), written between c. 7 BC and c. 24 AD. An eagle snatched the sandal of Rhodopis and dropped it in the lap of the king, leading to her eventual marriage with him (Strabo). Then the story was recorded later by the Roman orator Aelian, c.175 –c. 235 in Miscellaneous History book 13 (chapter 33), Aelian's account shows that the story of Rhodopis remained common throughout antiquity (Aelian). The story of Cinderella has been reinterpreted into many versions. Starting with the Chinese version, considered one of the oldest versions known as *Ye-Xian*, dates back 1000 years ago during the Tang Dynasty (618-908), published in the Miscellaneous Morsels collection from You Yang by Duan Chengshi around 850 BC. Where the protagonist forfeits her shoe on her way home from a royal event (Beauchamp 447). The story evolved significantly in Western Europe during the Renaissance; the first literary version was published around 1635 by Giambattista Basil in his collection *Il Pentamerone*, using “Zezolla” as a name for the protagonist who is aided by a fairy. Sixty years later, Charles Perrault published the first French version of “Cendrillon” or “La Petite Pantoufle de Verre” in 1697, where he introduced iconic elements of magic such as the fairy godmother, the pumpkin carriage, and other magical elements.

Perrault's fairy tale became the foundation for most Western versions, and it was used by Walt Disney to create his Cinderella movie in 1950. Later, the story was recorded by the Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, as a German version that appeared in print in 1812 called "Aschenputtel" or "Asphuttle" or "Ashputtel" (The Little Glass Slipper) where the protagonist loses her gold slipper, using darker themes and different magical elements (Grimm 69). Nowadays, there are thousands of versions of Cinderella stories with many forms and styles that share common themes and concepts.

1.4 Evolution of Cinderella

The Cinderella story is one of the most reimagined fairytales, evolving through the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Each period reflects its era's cultural and social values, as well as the morality of the time. The most enduring version in the 17th century is Charles Perrault's "Cendrillon" or "la petite pantoufle de verre 1697), published in France. Again, Perrault introduced new magical elements to the fairytale, which have made this story into a myth to this day; indeed, the Cinderella myth still influences modern adaptations.

The 18th century was a formative period for the Cinderella story, with Charles Perrault's version being widely read, translated, and adapted across Europe; it also served as a model for other fairytales and adaptations (Perrault; Zipes; Warner). The Brothers Grimm's *Aschenputtel*, published in 1812, for example, reinterprets Cinderella in a more German folk lens. This interpretation is darker than Perrault's one, where the fairy godmother was replaced by birds, and included grim punishments for the stepsisters, such as mutilation and blindness, in Zipes written in 2002 and Tatar released in 2003. This adaptation reflects 19th-century values.

Different theatrical adaptations also appeared during the 19th-century, beginning with the 1804 Drury Lane Theatre pantomime in London, followed by Rossini's 1817 opera *La Cenerentola*. Both versions included new characters as well as alternated story elements, such as Dandini along with a fairy queen instead of a godmother. These theatrical productions influenced the fundamental development of the contemporary Cinderella pantomime that became famous throughout Victorian England for its comic elements and musical and spectacular presentations.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Cinderella-inspired ballets such as Sergei Prokofiev's *Cinderella* in 1945 and numerous film adaptations, including early silent films from 1899 and 1911, and the iconic 1950 Walt Disney animated feature, which popularised Perrault's version worldwide (IMDb, para 6).

Today's adaptations of the original story transform its content through variations to modern standards of ethics and norms. Two contemporary picture book adaptations adopt gender reversal and shifting perspectives in their portrayals of Cinderella to challenge traditional narrative approaches through their modern adaptations in Babette Cole's *Prince Cinders*, published in 1987 and *Seriously, Cinderella Is SO Annoying!* Written in 2011.

Finally, from the Grimms' original moralistic fairy tale to operas, as well as pantomime ballets, films and current literary adaptations, Cinderella maintains its dynamism through regular cultural adaptations. (Metropolitan Opera; Šarec Miškin 45; Folklore Centre).

1.5 Scholarly Perspectives on Cinderella

The Cinderella story is considered one of the most popular and adapted fairy tales, and similarly, it is one of the most prominent subjects of academic study. Many scholars and critics have given special focus on Cinderella's interpretation from its origins to the modern adaptations, reflecting on the implications of such an evolution and what they reflect.

In considering common themes and patterns between several versions of the tale, academics such as Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (Russian original) published in 1928; English translation, 1958) have examined the structural components of fairy tales. His writings highlight how, despite their great stylistic and content diversity, fairy tales frequently have underlying narrative patterns that appeal to audiences of many backgrounds, which we can agree with Propp. Thus, each interpretation follows events: initial misfortune, magical intervention, and transformation. Perrault's version was written to show the 17th-century French nobility. The "fairy" godmother is a supplement to the story that appears from a 17th-century French literary tradition developed by a group of women writers who started to write *conte de fées*, or tales about fairies. Zipes says in his work *The Meaning of Fairy Tale within the Evolution of Culture* that this tradition arose as a response to Greek and Roman mythology, a dispute over the societal roles of women, and was an acknowledgment that this new "fairy tale" was considered "an eminently female genre in the seventeenth-century consciousness" (225).

As Bronwyn Reddan claims in *Thinking through Things: Magical Objects, Power, and Agency in French Fairy Tales* written in 2016 "Like the tales in which they appear, magical objects invite readers into a marvelous world in which the rules of reality are suspended."(191) Indeed, it is necessary to remember the profound patriarchal tendencies in 17th-century France that resonated through the social circles and restricted the female authors

in their work. However, this was not always the case. Reddan highlights how magical events in these tales immerse readers into a world far from reality, which this research confirms.

The Cinderella tale focuses on the portrayal of the protagonist as a kind and passive person who represents themes of virtue and others, as Marina Warner claims in *The Old Wives' Tale*, published in 1999 “fairy tale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas” (313), while others critique her portrayal as a poor young woman who suffers from hardship. According to Lazar, author of *Gender, Feminism, and Fiction in France, 1715-1815*, Perrault exhibits gender stereotypes in most of the stories as: the heroine have to last “hardship, humiliation, and degradation and remain very patient until she meets a man of higher standing who will eventually see her for her true virtues and beauty and rescue her” (94). This is not the case in Cinderella’s (2021) adaptation, which we will examine in this dissertation. We will be highlighting how these modern stories and movies, contrary to the original tale, work on highlighting the main character as an independent woman who does not need any help from men; quite the contrary, she is the woman playing the heroine role.

Marina Warner also critiques the passive portrayal of Cinderella in Perrault’s narrative as a woman who embodies patience and endurance rather than agency, a reflection of the gender expectations of the time. Lazar further argues that Perrault’s narrative reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, where the heroine’s reward is contingent upon her suffering and eventual recognition by a male saviour.

"Cinderella's Transformation: From Patriarchal to 21st Century Expressions of Femininity", written by T. Parsons, examines Cinderella storyline elements like the heartbroken heroine and the evil stepmother. She explores how these narratives showcase heroines who value independence above marriage and cultivate supportive female relationships, as contemporary

adaptations that challenge binary gender stereotypes, which this study will also demonstrate through the selected adaptations.

Bernier's dissertation, *The Cult of Cinderella: A Perennial Princess in Fourth-Wave Feminist America* written in explores how Cinderella's image and narrative have been reshaped in light of fourth-wave feminism through media and popular culture, which is something obvious in the 2021 adaptation. Indeed, this adaptation showcases Ella as a strong character aiming to make her dreams come true, which is something that happens at the end of the movie, moving thus, from the "damsel in distress" trope.

In their research article "Cinderella: The Feminist Tale", published in 2024, Puri B. and Christanti use discourse analysis to investigate how liberal feminism is portrayed in different adaptations, further examining feminist viewpoints. This study demonstrates how Cinderella's character is altered in modern adaptations to represent a stronger heroine who actively works to overcome injustice, in line with contemporary feminist ideas. These reinterpretations emphasise themes of strength and self-determination while questioning conventional depictions of female protagonists. This work will critically engage with intersectional feminist theories, exploring how each interpretation intersects with class, gender, and race. And offer fresh insights into the real impact of feminism on Cinderella adaptations.

All things considered, these studies show that the Cinderella story is still a dynamic text that can be depicted in a variety of mediums. Scholars demonstrate Cinderella's continued relevance in tackling modern themes of gender, identity, and societal expectations. This fairy tale's ongoing appeal demonstrates its ability to change while maintaining its essential moral lessons.

Despite these rich discussions, there remains a gap in comparative analyses that systematically examine how Perrault's original text and these two significant film adaptations negotiate themes of gender, class, and agency. While Perrault's tale reflects 17th-century patriarchal values, *Ever After* (1998) and the 2021 *Cinderella* reimagine the story to resonate with evolving feminist ideologies and contemporary social realities. This study aims to fill this gap by critically comparing the narrative structures, characterisations, and thematic emphases across these selected texts, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on fairy tale versions and feminist adaptations.

In conclusion, the *Cinderella* story, with its ancient origins, has evolved across cultures while retaining its core narrative elements. It has been adapted to reflect the values and social norms of different societies. These numerous adaptations of *Cinderella* highlight its role as a dynamic folkloric narrative that resonates with social ideals across times and places.

Chapter Two: Feminist Critique

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is about the feminist critique, where we will discuss the three selected versions from a feminist approach, highlighting how the protagonist Cinderella is depicted across the versions. How each Cinderella is portrayed and changed deeply challenges the traditional gender norms.

The Cinderella narrative, a seemingly simple tale of a mistreated girl finding her prince, has proven remarkably resilient across centuries and cultures. From Charles Perrault's seminal 17th-century version to contemporary adaptations like *Ever After* (1998) and *Cinderella* (2021), the story continues to captivate and evolve. By employing feminist literary criticism and adaptation theory, this study will explore how evolving societal values—particularly those surrounding gender, class, and female agency—are reflected in these distinct tellings of a timeless story. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to understand the enduring appeal of Cinderella and the ways in which its adaptations both reinforce and challenge deeply ingrained cultural narratives.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the countless adaptations of the classic Cinderella story and themes have known extensive academic critique and discussion throughout the years. Our dissertation endeavours to present a topical feminist reading of the selected Cinderella adaptations in comparison with the original written text of Perrault. Using a feminist lens to examine different cinematic renditions of Cinderella enables us to highlight all the different mechanisms of patriarchal agendas, but also the advancement of female empowerment – taking place through the silver screen – such as making research about how the adapted stories either strengthen, divert, or create new understandings of gender norms.

Current cinematic adaptations of Cinderella defy conventional gender rules through the use of self-dependent and strong heroines who take action and focus on themselves

instead of marriage. These female protagonists refuse to adopt traditional norms and behaviours by freeing themselves from servitude while reaching their personal goals of self-actualisation.

Through the adaptations provided by Malinda Lo and Sarah Pinborough, the women filmmakers develop their versions of Cinderellas who protect themselves by escaping bad circumstances and building their independent future. The revised narratives include nurturing female bonding alongside rethinking the cruel stepmother concept as a binary gender archetype. These new adaptations centre on women running businesses and questioning stereotypes, such as considering beauty as the only feminine asset for a woman to possess.

2.2 Introduction to feminist theory in literature

Feminist theory in literature critically examines how gender roles influence the interpretation of texts. It seeks to celebrate women's voices and focuses on how they challenge patriarchal norms.

2.2.1 Overview of feminist literary critique and its evolution

Feminist literary criticism started in the late 1700s as a critical analysis of literary works based on feminist theory. It focused on analysing how literature read from a feminist perspective addresses issues regarding womanhood in its many aspects and critiquing male-dominant discourses to reveal gender stereotypes. Also, feminist literary criticism creates a context of women's experiences and history, providing them a voice and studying the case of minimising women's literature. It has been developed into four waves, starting from the first one, called liberal feminism started in the late 1700s to early 1900s, where writers and novelists started to portray the female character in their works. Many writers work on feminist critique, such as Geoffrey Chaucer's "Wife of Bath", and other works that could be an example of early feminist critics (Plain 6). This period was the time when the problem

faced by women became serious, and the government started to consider the importance of equal rights. The second wave started in the early 1960s to 1970, known as the women's liberation movement, it is focused on equal rights between men and women. The National Organisation for Women (NOW) started in 1966 as a movement for equal working conditions for women in the United States. Showalter, in her book "A Literature of Their Own" 1977 suggests three phases of women's writing, in the first one, which is called the feminine phase. They try to follow what men suggest without complaining. For the second one, the feminist phase, women writers start to critique the way society treated them by portraying themes of gender criticism. And the third, the female phase, women assume that their work is acceptable ("Feminist Approaches"). Finally, the third wave of feminism started in the early 1990s, and the fourth wave started in 2012, which focused on individual rights and understanding the experience of women with social issues. The fourth wave shed light on women's equality and rights and encouraged women to reclaim their identity and voice. The 20th-century feminist literary critique saw significant advancement; it aimed to integrate how gender interacts with social identities like class, race, and sexuality to shape literary production. Writers like Woolf in her work, such as "A Room of One's Own" examine women's representation in literature. Woolf speaking at a conference for women's literature, speculates that there is still a long way to go for women and so-called 'women's issues' in creative space, especially based on the differences in educational quality Woolf observed between men and women. Later, it introduces new methodologies to a more understanding literature (Woolf 17-21). Susan Lanser suggested changing the name of "feminist literary criticism" to "critical literary feminism" to change the focus from criticism to feminism and points out that writing such works requires "consciousness of political context." (Lanser 3)

2.2 Feminist Analysis of Perrault's *Cinderella*

Cinderella original tale was written by the French author Charles Perrault, who was born in 1678 in Paris in a rich bourgeois family, known as the father of the modern fairy tale. He was a member of The Académie Française and a prominent figure in the “Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns”, who played an essential role in shaping the fairy style and advocating for modern literature. His famous collection called *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* 1697, known as *Tales of Mother Goose* and *Cinderella*, is one of these tales. Perrault wrote *Cinderella* during the cultural transformation in France under Louis XIV. This era emphasised social mobility, morality, refinement, and courtly manners. Perrault sought to include them in contemporary values. His work shows how literature developed from ancient to modern retelling. His tales were aimed at both children and adults to convey timeless moral lessons. Perrault, through the story of *Cinderella*, which is about a young woman who was mistreated by her stepmother and stepsister, despite what she suffered from, she was always kind to them. When the prince organises a ball to find a bride, the fairy godmother's magical transformation provides her with a beautiful dress with glass slippers. She turns a pumpkin into a carriage, and mice into horses. *Cinderella* captivates the prince with her beauty, but she leaves before midnight. On the second night, she forgets about the time the clock strikes twelve, she leaves one slipper behind her, and the prince searches for her in the kingdom. He finds *Cinderella* and the slipper fits on her; she produces the matching pair and marries the prince. Finally, *Cinderella* gets married to the prince, forgives her stepsisters, and even helps them find a husband from the courts. Perrault's version of *Cinderella* emphasises kindness and forgiveness while creating magical elements. (Perrault)

Charles Perrault's “*Cinderella*” is a classic tale that reflects the values of 17th-century aristocratic Parisian society. It shows how the role of women was primarily trapped between domestic duties and motherhood. Perrault's tale presents complex and paradoxical morals,

such as gender roles, marriage, and social mobility. He also depicts heterogeneous characters with different personalities to show how women were treated at that time. Starting from Cinderella embodies the good archetype to show that being beautiful and passive, she got the name Cinderella because she was forced to work and sleep in the dust and cinders. All Cinderella does in the story is clean and cook, as every woman does, but also helps her sisters and does the tasks that her stepmother asks for without complaining, showing how Cinderella is a gentle, obedient, and submissive character, and despite the mistreatment, Cinderella remains kind and patient. On the other hand, her stepmother and stepsisters are portrayed as evil characters embodying negative archetypes to show that women can be kind and submissive on the one hand and malicious on the other hand. Cinderella's stepmother treats her badly and her stepsisters treat her just as equally unkind as their mother, earning them to be described as "vain and haughty". The stepsisters were always well-dressed and took advantage of Cinderella without ever being thankful, but also made fun of her at every opportunity. It is worth mentioning that the younger stepsister is described as less rude than the oldest one. However, in all her kindness, Cinderella still forgives her stepsisters after her marriage to the prince. Perrault showcases how beauty and kindness are more important than outward beauty and highlights Cinderella's virtue. Perrault reemphasises that women's status is built by men and that a woman's good character and behaviour are key to attracting a partner. In Perrault's narrative, Cinderella was a slave in her own house and was only elevated to a respectable social status when she got married to the prince. Charles, through Cinderella's character, shows that kindness can lead to social elevation. (Vargas 2).

2.3 Feminist perspectives of *Ever After* and *Cinderella 2021*

Andy Tennant directed this Cinderella-inspired film. The Brothers Grimm arrive at the home of a wealthy woman Grande Dame (Jeanne Moreau), who recounts the many myths surrounding the story of the Maiden in Ashes before telling the "true" story of her ancestors. In a flashback, the story focuses on Danielle, the daughter of a wealthy widower and a landowner in the 16th-century. After returning to France with his new wife, Rodmilla (Anjelica Huston), and their two daughters, he dies of a heart attack after a while. Ten years later, Danielle (Drew Barrymore) is forced to become a servant to her stepmother, Baroness Rodmilla de Ghent, and stepsisters, Marguerite (Megan Dodds) and Jacqueline (Melanie Lynskey). Danielle encounters Prince Henry (Dougray Scott) when he is trying to get away from his arranged marriage to Princess Gabriella of Spain. Catching him stealing, an unexpected encounter occurs between them. Masquerading as a noblewoman, Danielle goes to the castle to buy back a family servant, Maurice (Walter Sparrow), sold by Rodmilla. Prince Henry is captivated by her intelligence and spirit and believes her to be Countess Nicole de Lancret, Danielle's late mother's name. King Francis (Timothy West) declares that Prince Henry has to pick a bride at the upcoming ball or marry Gabriella. Rodmilla sees this as an opportunity for her daughter, Marguerite and goes to great lengths to promote her to the prince. At the ball, Rodmilla reveals Danielle's identity, which results in Henry rejecting her and making Danielle run away heartbroken. Henry ends the engagement after recognising Gabriella loves someone else. Inventor-artist Leonardo Da Vinci (Patrick Godfrey), who was a guest at the ball, proposes advice to Prince Henry on matters of the heart. Then Henry learns Rodmilla sold Danielle to the estate owner Pierre le Pieu (Richard O'Brien), he rushes to rescue her, only to discover she had previously left using the power she owns. At this moment, Henry reveals his romantic feelings to Danielle by proposing marriage while she waits patiently. The royal court confronts Rodmilla about her deceit, stripping her of her title.

Danielle, now married to Henry, ensures Rodmilla and Marguerite face a life of servitude, but vows to never think of them again.

Ever After: A Cinderella Story was directed by Andy Tennant and produced by Mireille Soria and Tracey Trench. The screenplay was written by Susannah Grant, Andy Tennant, and Rick Parks. This 1998 romantic period drama won several notable awards, including four Saturn Awards, with Drew Barrymore awarded as the Best Actress and Jenny Beavan winning Best Costumes. Additionally, the film got a Blockbuster Entertainment Award for Favourite Actress and Supporting Actress for Drew Barrymore and Anjelica Huston, respectively (IMDb). The movie's success can be attributed to its modern, post-feminist interpretation of the classic Cinderella tale, set in Renaissance-era France. The film concludes with the Grande Dame revealing that Danielle's picture stayed hanging in Henry's university until the French Revolution, highlighting the enduring impact of their love story.

The Cinderella character in “*Cinderella: Ever After*” of 1998, Danielle, is represented as intelligent, independent, and resourceful. She doesn't just wait for rescue; she actively participates in the community, speaking out, advocating for the weak, and even saving the life of Prince Henry, her equivalent of Prince Charming, who is usually portrayed as a stereotypical rescuer of the “damsel in distress”. Compared to the passive Cinderella archetype, this is a major shift. She maintains her faith by protesting Rodmilla, her stepmother, but also attempts to buy back a slave who was sold into enslavement.

Opposite to the stereotypical Cinderella, who focuses solely on beauty and domestic skills, Danielle possesses culture and worth. She is credited with her intelligence and education, enabling her to challenge social norms and have profound conversations with the prince. This example, which emphasises the value of women's intellects rather than the tired

narrative of superficiality and gender normativity as a whole, represents a refreshing feminist struggle.

The strict class systems of the period are referenced throughout the film. Danielle defies the prince's prejudices toward the lower classes, displaying genuine nobility despite being a commoner by circumstance. While this allows Danielle to rise within the class structure, her final decision also includes her marriage to a prince, which may have reinforced this decision.

Prince Henry is more than just the stereotypical good-looking "Prince Charming" protagonist. Danielle's sympathy and principles have a direct influence on him, causing him to change. He obtains the ability to see past social status and adopts a more equal viewpoint, even turning down a planned marriage because it is politically convenient. This is a subtle feminist point: rather than her need to adapt to fit into his world, his worldview changes to embrace hers. Furthermore, Danielle breaks the media's usual double standard, in which the man usually saves the lady, by saving the prince from an unfortunate incident with a group of gypsies, in the scene where Danielle saves Prince Henry from the gypsies, the fight occurs because Henry and Danielle are lost while out walking together. Danielle removed her dress to climb the rocks and get a broader view, leaving her in her undergarments. At that moment, Henry was attacked by gypsies, who were causing trouble in the area. The gypsies took Danielle's dress, leading to a fight in which Danielle requested its return and a horse as compensation. The gypsy leader accepted her condition to anything she could carry, and Danielle cleverly used this to her advantage by lifting Henry over her shoulders and "carrying" him away, thus saving him from further harm. This moment highlights Danielle's wisdom, strength, and quick thinking, as well as her ability to protect Henry humorously and unexpectedly.

“Ever After” has drawn criticism for several reasons despite its feminist components. One may argue that the dependence on a "happily ever after" with a prince—even one who has undergone reform—reinforces conventional patriarchal systems. Some contend that the structural injustices of Danielle's society are not challenged by her actions of resistance. Some claim that her empowerment is less about overthrowing the current regime than achieving personal success. As Carmel Derasin points out, while Danielle is portrayed as strong-willed and intelligent, the film's narrative aligns more closely with liberal feminist ideals that emphasise individual achievement. Rather than systemic change, thereby limiting its challenge to patriarchal structures (Derasin).

We agree with Derasin's claim because we are analysing the film *Ever After*, and we witness an active heroine who displays intelligence while defying passive traditional female roles. The movie's commitment to the traditional happy ending through the prince means it fails to complete a total overthrow of patriarchal systems. The film plays an important role as a retelling of traditional events, yet does so while conveying thoughtful feminist guidelines by remaining consistent with the original fairy tale formula.

Some reviewers and commentators, like Elizabeth Rose Gruner, Robyn McCallum and John Stephens, and Preston, have referred to it as "feminist" or even "postfeminist," highlighting its "female empowerment" and "girl-positive" aspects. The movie “rewrites Cinderella for a feminist, perhaps even a post-feminist, future," according to Gruner in her article *Saving 'Cinderella': History and Story in Ashpet and Ever After*. It is acknowledged as "a story of female resistance within a dominating patriarchy" by McCallum and Stephens. Similarly, according to Preston, “Ever After” makes an effort to "respond to the last thirty years of feminist critique of gender construction" and "redefine gender boundaries" in well-known fairy tales. Preston mentioned it in her dissertation titled "Re-conceptualising Gender through Narrative Play (Preston 135). This dissertation extensively discusses how *Ever*

After engages with feminist critiques and gender as an unstable construct through narrative strategies, explicitly mentioning the redefinition of gender boundaries and responding to the feminist theory developed over the last thirty years.

2.4 Feminist Critique of *Ever After* and *Cinderella 2021*

The 1998 film “Cinderella” is a historical fiction adaptation of the classic fairy tale. It is about Danielle as Cinderella, a young woman with a strong and independent, and intelligent character. An assertive heroine who challenges patriarchal norms rather than passively awaiting rescue. While the film removes magical elements and emphasises her resourcefulness and courage, some critics argue that despite her empowerment, Danielle’s story remains confined within traditional romantic and patriarchal structures, reflecting a limited form of feminism centred on individual strength rather than systemic change. Such as Scholar Elizabeth Bell in her work *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture* written in 2002 critiques *Ever After* for offering a limited, mass-mediated form of feminism that emphasizes individual strength and romantic success without challenging the underlying patriarchal structures, thus containing Danielle’s feminist potential within conventional gender roles. Nonetheless, *Ever After* is widely praised for presenting a feminist fairytale that inspires female agency and challenges traditional gender roles.

The 2021 film "Cinderella" is a modern musical adaptation of the classic fairy tale. It begins with Camila Cabello as Cinderella, a young woman with ambitions to open her dressmaking shop, "Dresses by Ella." She lives with her cruel stepmother, Vivian (Idina Menzel), and her two stepsisters, Malvolia (Maddie Baillio) and Narissa (Charlotte Spencer).

The story begins when Prince Robert (Nicholas Galitzine) notices Ella at a guard-changing ceremony. Disguising himself as a commoner, he meets her at the market, where he buys one of her dresses and invites her to a royal ball. The ball is a networking opportunity for Ella to showcase her designs, but her stepmother forbids her from going. However, with the help of her "Fabulous Godmother" (Billy Porter), Ella appears at the ball in a magical dress and glass slippers.

At the ball, Ella met Prince Robert again. He asked for her hand, but she refused, preferring her career to marriage. After she left the party, Ella's stepmother discovered her relationship with the prince and tried to persuade her to marry him. However, Ella escapes and eventually reunites with Robert in a forest. They confess their love and decide to travel the world together, with Robert giving up his claim to the throne. The film ends with Prince Robert's sister, Gwen (Tallulah Greive), being named as the new heir to the throne (*Cinderella 2021 - Plot - IMDb*).

The 2021 film *Cinderella* was directed by Kay Cannon and produced by James Corden, along with Leo Pearlman, Jonathan Kadin, and Shannon McIntosh. The movie, a romantic comedy jukebox musical, stars Camila Cabello as Cinderella and features a cast including Nicholas Galitzine, Idina Menzel, and Billy Porter. Contrary to mixed reviews, "Cinderella" received significant attention as the audience's favourite film of 2021 under the Academy Awards' Audience Favourites initiative. The film won numerous awards, including the Audience Favourite category at the Academy Awards, and received a Reframe seal for its cinematography. The soundtrack, composed by Mychael Danna and Jessica Rose Weiss, was also nominated for a Hollywood Music in Media Award. While not widely acclaimed by critics, *Cinderella* remains notable for its unique musical approach and its popularity among audiences (*Cinderella 2021 - Awards – IMDb*; "Cinderella").

Ella is presented as a self-assured businesswoman and clothing designer with no interest in marriage prospects and climbing the social ladder by marrying the eligible prince who is seeking a wife. Her inclination for her job instead of thinking of marriage reflects the contemporary emphasis on female independence and ambition. By day, she pursues her business objectives as she needs to, and she falls in love with the prince.

The film demonstrates the traditional gender biases experienced by businesswoman Ella by being a victim of discrimination for her career ambitions as a poor female fashion designer/tailor. This conversation happened when Cinderella tried to sell her dress at the market. But when she looks around, there are only men who open the shop there. She is also mocked by the people there because, according to them, only men can do business. In this scene, she starts her journey to struggle against the inequality:

- **Robert:** Sounds like you need to lower your price. **Ella:** Sir, please do not pile on, okay? Not today. **Robert:** No, no, I am sorry. It is a beautiful dress. **Ella:** Right? I should be allowed to sell it. **Robert:** Sure, but women can't own shops. **Ella:** Uh-huh. And that's unfair. **Robert:** Is it? **Ella:** Yes! Us ladies give birth. We run households. Surely, we can run a business. Can't be that hard. I mean, wouldn't it just be great if I could have my own shop? Right here. I could hang my garments on that side. And I'd say things like, "Thank you. Come again." (*Cinderella* 33:42 – 34:00)

The community, along with her stepmother, express contempt towards her desire to run a business which mirrors obstacles that women meet in male-controlled businesses in the actual world. Through its storyline, the film portrays both the hardships men encounter when trying

to conform to social expectations, alongside its examination of women's discrimination when entering an all-male world, the business world.

During the period of marriageable youth, self-acceptance and self-awareness are essential, and Ella showed her stepsisters how believing in their true value transcended superficiality. The way you feel when seeing your reflection in the mirror matters most to you, and not what anyone else thinks, according to Ella.

Through its narrative, the film presents women as victims of patriarchal oppression, so they must unite to gain dominance over the system. The plot about love through marriage should never shift from patriarchal control to matriarchal dominance; women should unite against patriarchal oppression, yet the traditional romantic plot in narratives should not be reversed for matriarchal control, since its primary goal should be confronting existing power systems.

The main focus of the movie is to follow a single woman who has deep insight into her oppression, but still needs to persuade a powerful male figure. She is working as a dressmaker to pursue independence despite facing opposition from a society that refuses financial independence to women. Ella refuses the prince's proposal as she does not want to remain stuck in a royal box despite having feelings for him, but her dressmaking career depends on Queen Beatrice's patronage because the prince's abdication opened this pathway. Women living under patriarchal regimes must use male-controlled institutions as a way to circumvent the institutional barriers that prevent them from owning their businesses. Through its critique, the film demonstrates how Ella uses her royal relationships to advance without losing her independence.

The movie minimises the screen time of Princess Gwen and Queen Beatrice by prioritising the leading role of Ella. The lack of fulfilment for all women makes it difficult to view the

movie as truly feminist content because Ella is the sole character who experiences endearment. Indeed, the film weakly portrays Princess Gwen and Queen Beatrice through minor appearances while keeping the main focus on the Ella story. The story does not establish itself as a genuine feminist adaptation of the fairy tale because its hero, Ella, appears to be the only woman who attains lasting happiness with a prince.

According to the film's narrative, women function as victims within a patriarchal system, thus requiring their revolt through declarations of female superiority. Patriarchal subordination has no place in love stories but the removal of one form of domination does not ensure the absence of matriarchal control. The elimination of patriarchal power dynamics in love stories does not automatically stop new hierarchical structures (such as female control) from appearing since the narrative has the potential to exchange one type of oppression for another. In the 2021 retelling of Cinderella, Ella avoids marrying for liberty, which the film presents as feminist advancement, yet her business growth depends on Queen Beatrice's sponsorship, maintained through royal powers that historically favoured male rule.

The film avoids depicting all male characters as idiotic beings lacking self-autonomy to convey the message that patriarchal systems are harmful to both men and women and that a healthy society embraces diverse expressions of masculinity.

Through its storyline, the film presents genuine issues that occur when men attempt to match conventional expectations of appearance even though they truly wish to present themselves differently, through the characterization of men who are emotionally complex and willing to defy gender stereotypes the filmmaker demonstrates how traditional masculinity constructs damage men by imposing societal restrictions on their self-expression. Through its message, the film supports a society that lets men express their authentic selves while promoting women's empowerment instead of sustaining destructive social stereotypes.

Gwen receives the crown as an accidental inheritance when her older brother chooses to renounce the position. The character development of Vivian, the stepmother, remains superficial throughout the story. During the last part of the film, there is no indication of where the female characters stand to tell us how their individual stories will progress following the ending.

The story presents itself as slightly more contemporary compared to retellings of Cinderella happening in present-day society. The character rejects Prince Robert and pursues her ambitions instead of choosing him despite her attraction to him.

Set in medieval times, the film has abandoned its portrayal of its female characters with simple goals and ordinary lifestyles. In addition to marrying the prince, Cinderella has achieved diverse ambitions that further her life goals. Cinderella's efforts to modernise gender dynamics are still praiseworthy. Even though its quality does not reach groundbreaking levels in feminist ambitions.

At its essence, *Cinderella 2021* revolves around the idea that women are victims in a patriarchal society and must revolt against this system by asserting their feminine superiority. In a story about love and marriage, paternal subservience should not be replaced by maternal subservience. Cinderella should not give up her career to be with her true love, but neither should her prince give up his career to be with her. In the case of *Cinderella* (2021), personal sacrifice seems inevitable, but it must be equitable for both parties (Austen).

In conclusion, this chapter analyses *Cinderella* by Charles Perrault to show how Cinderella is depicted in a more passive and obedient way, highlighting how Cinderella found her love because of her inner beauty rather than external beauty. *Ever After* is praised for portraying Danielle as a strong, intelligent, and resourceful woman who embodies liberal

feminist ideals of empowerment and self-determination, yet critics like Stephanie Myers argue that it ultimately reinforces patriarchal structures by centring romantic union as the heroine's fulfilment. Similarly, the 2021 *Cinderella* adaptation advances feminist themes by emphasising independence, ambition, and equality, challenging traditional gender roles and promoting female agency. However, some critics note that despite these feminist strides, both films operate within conventional narratives that still prioritise romance and individual success over systemic change. Together, these adaptations reflect ongoing feminist efforts to reshape Cinderella's story while revealing the complexities of negotiating feminist ideals within popular culture.

Chapter Three: Comparative Analysis

3.1 Introduction

The third chapter is about comparative analysis, where we will highlight the similarities and differences in how the story is told and what values and ideologies are emphasised. We will compare key themes using Deductive Thematic Analysis, such as identity, love and female empowerment. Character dynamics in how each character is portrayed in these three versions. In addition to the narrative style and structures.

The Cinderella tale has been adapted through the times, and each adaptation differs from the previous one. Charles Perrault's *Cinderella* 16 97 introduced key themes such as transformation and good versus evil, highlighting Cinderella's virtue and kindness. Adaptations like *Ever After* (1998) and *Cinderella* (2021) include themes of empowerment and gender roles in order to highlight the struggle faced by the protagonists. These modern interpretations continue to resonate across cultures. We will now delve into the themes tackled in each version.

3.2 Methodology for Comparative Analysis

After reading Charles Perrault's original story and watching the two film adaptations *Cinderella* “Ever After” and “Cinderella 2021”, and using Deductive Thematic Analysis, which focuses on several key themes. First, identity is explored to show how the main characters in each version of the selected works search for their sense of self. Next, love is examined to illustrate how true love persists despite economic transitions between partners. Social mobility is also considered to reveal how class differences are depicted and scrutinised. Finally, characterisation is compared by looking at the portrayals and motivations of characters such as Cinderella, the fairy godmother, the stepmother, the stepsisters, the prince, the king, the queen, and other round characters who influence the narratives. Gender

roles through a feminist perspective are also an important theme that is talked about and analysed in this dissertation in order to examine how each version reflects or reinforces traditional gender roles, and how each version portrays women regarding their independence. Analysing the way each adaptation deals with dominant patriarchal systems, the narrative structure and style in which we compare all the versions of Cinderella, storytelling methods, and style. The research utilises an analytical structure to investigate both the original Cinderella story and its adaptations. The research framework combines theoretical approaches with methodological approaches to study how Cinderella's narrative changed throughout history. The framework establishes and describes its fundamental structural elements in successive subsections.

3.3 Themes Analysis

The Cinderella story by Charles Perrault is a tale that presents several themes, including kindness, forgiveness, the importance of inner beauty, and many others that reflect the social values of the 17th century. The 1998 film adaptation of the Cinderella tale, *Ever After*, is a film directed by Andy Tennant that differs from the classic tale, as it offers feminist interpretations and is presented as a historical fiction during Renaissance-Era France in the 16th century. It focuses on female empowerment, identity, social justice, equality, and family relationships. And the 2021 film adaptation of Cinderella, directed by Key Cannon, differs from the traditional tale by its modern interpretation, with its added element of musicality to make it into a musical, among other elements. This adaptation introduces new themes such as empowerment and individuality, love and relationships, but also a critique of gender norms. Starting with the themes of kindness and forgiveness, Cinderella embodies forgiveness and kindness even when her stepmother and stepsisters treat her badly and call her Cinderwench and nasty (Boren 102). Even after marrying the prince and gaining power and stature, Cinderella pardons her stepsisters and helps find good matches to marry them

From the king's court. Cinderella in *Ever After* is unlike the other traditional versions; the protagonist Danielle (Cinderella) is portrayed as a strong, independent, and intelligent woman who seeks to shape her life and follows her own choices rather than be saved by anybody else, breaking away from the damsel in distress stereotype. Similar to Perrault's, *Ever After*'s Cinderella also embodies kindness and resilience, even when her stepmother treats her badly. Danielle always tries to satisfy her stepmother because she was the one who raised her. The film also critiques social injustice and inequality, as Danielle defends poor people's rights and oppression, and then later on in the narrative, she asks the prince to look into the needs of his people. Ella (Cinderella) is depicted differently from the earlier ones, as a strong, independent, and confident female protagonist who tries to follow her dream and become a successful dressmaker, creating her own identity rather than waiting for the prince to save her, showing that women can control their fates. Another theme is love and relationships. When it comes to Cinderella and the classic fairytale, the romantic character of this fairytale is undeniable; the theme of love is thus always at the forefront when analysing this narrative. The relationship between Cinderella and the prince thus highlights the theme of love and finding one's true love and 'happy ever after' For Danielle, her relationship with the prince is very special and modern, the way when she encourages him to build his dream and life. Romance is an equally important element in this version. The relationship between the main female character, Ella (Cinderella) and the prince, Robert, is built on respect, supporting each other's dreams, and not following the traditional social norms. Highlighting that true love is based on understanding each other's souls and minds, and not just admiring superficial qualities. Good versus evil is another essential theme discussed in the Cinderella tale, which is mirrored through the protagonist herself in this classic tale. Cinderella is represented as good and kind, while her stepmother and stepsisters are the opposite,

representing evil through jealousy, as also seen in the *Ever After* version and the *Cinderella* 2021 version.

Social class and mobility are other key themes in the original version that highlight the rise of the female protagonist from servitude to royalty and the implications that come along with each role. In *Ever After* (1998), social mobility is achieved through Danielle's intelligence and her ability to inspire Prince Henry to see beyond class distinctions, while in *Cinderella* (2021), Ella's entrepreneurial ambitions and rejection of societal norms highlight a modern, self-driven approach to breaking class barriers. Finally, Charles Perrault in the *Cinderella* story represents classism that highlights the transformation of Cinderella from a servant and poor woman to a noblewoman once she marries the prince. Perrault's *Cinderella* tale in the 17th century was marked by cultural, political, and social developments and the establishment of Versailles as a symbol of royal grandeur, which influenced his work to explore themes that reflect moral lessons and social values of the time.

For *Cinderella* (2021), the story includes social commentary in the way Ella serves as a strong and confident character who tries to convey the message that the role of women in society is not just getting married and having kids and confronting societal expectations. Similarly, the film displays a critique of classic gender roles by portraying Cinderella as a powerful woman who struggles against traditional principles and wants to make her dream come true and become a successful business owner, inspiring others to follow their dreams. (Puspitasari 60-67) The *Cinderella* 2021 adaptation thus transforms the traditional tale into an inspiring message for contemporary audiences, encouraging them to follow their dream. This interpretation introduced the LGBTQ agenda through the fairy godmother character, which is played by Billy Porter as a genderless fairy godparent to encourage diversity and break away from traditional gender stereotypes.

Charles Perrault's *Cinderella* and the adaptations *Ever After* (1998) and *Cinderella* (2021) explore themes that reflect the values of their time, respectively. Perrault focuses on Cinderella as kind and passive. In contrast, the modern interpretations focus on female empowerment and autonomy, without necessarily breaking entirely away from the romantic elements proper to the Cinderella fairytale and her 'happily ever after', adapted depending on the context in which the narratives are developed. The three versions, then, explore themes that reflect topical values and norms, respective to their period.

3.4 Character Comparison

The characterisations of "Cinderella" in Charles Perrault's version and its screen adaptations in *Ever After* and *Cinderella* share similar character personalities but also show the adaptive and changing nature of some other characters.

Starting from the protagonist Cinderella in Perrault's version, she is portrayed as a kind and gentle young woman, even when her stepmother treated her badly, she faced that violence with silence. Showing the importance of how inner beauty is more important than external beauty. She represents the female who gets what she deserves through her virtue. In *Ever After* (1998), Danielle de Barbara (Cinderella) is portrayed as an intelligent, smart, and, spirited young woman who does not relinquish her wit and dreams of a better life when faced with mistreatment at the hands of her stepmother and her stepsisters, along with society's unfairness towards women and lower-class people. Nevertheless, Danielle represents the strong and independent female protagonist.

Ella is similar to Danielle and is depicted as a young, strong and independent girl who lives in an old kingdom dreaming of becoming a famous dressmaker who owns a store. But where Cinderella lived was forbidden for women to do business. She proves her search for

autonomy and willingness to succeed on her own when she refuses Prince Robert's proposal, challenging the classic Cinderella storyline. She represents the strong women who faced the traditional norms and values of society (Eynon 11-13). From this dialogue

Cinderella: "Ladies and gentlemen! For a mere five pieces of silver, who would like to purchase

This one-of-a-kind, completely non-stolen dress?"

The man: "Here's a laugh. This girl fancies herself a businessman"

(Laughter)

Cinderella: "Don't-Don't listen to him. This is a one-of-a-kind design"

The Man: "I'd stop while you're ahead, missy"

The Woman: "Who on earth do you think you are? Honestly"

(forever dreaming transcription 2021)

Even if she knew that she should not do business, she wanted to sell her designed dress, even though people around her started to laugh, but she ignored them and continued trying to convince people. (Ida Ayu Made Wulan Lestari 182-188)

The prince is another essential character depicted by Perrault as a handsome prince who saves Cinderella from her misfortunes. He represents the ideal man who helps the protagonist from her poor life to a higher social status through marriage. For *Ever After*, Prince Henry is portrayed as handsome and someone who flees his responsibilities as a future King, seeking personal autonomy and happiness. He believes in Danielle's aspirations and thoughts, and his relationship with Danielle is built on mutual respect and values.

In the 2021 film, the prince, Robert, shares the same personality as the previous prince, Henry. He is depicted as a person who is interested in finding true love rather than his

royal responsibilities as a prince. In all versions, the stepmother and stepsisters are antagonists who exploit Cinderella. Perrault portrays the stepmother as proud and snooty, while the stepsisters are portrayed as ugly, unattractive, and selfish, contrasting with Cinderella's virtue. Highlighting the societal norms and expectations faced by women at that time, Rodmila de Ghent (Cinderella's stepmother) in *Ever After* is depicted as a strong and bad character, because of the circumstances in which she lived. Her main goal and desire are to secure her daughters' future. So, the stepmother figure here represents the societal pressure faced by women during the Renaissance period.

Marguerite and Jacqueline, the stepsisters, on the other hand, are again represented differently. Marguerite is just like her mother, obsessively ambitious, while Jacqueline is more polite and kind, torn between her moral values and her family's destiny. Vivian, the stepmother, is depicted as a complex figure, and like all the stepmothers of the previous tales, she seeks to secure her daughters' future in an uncertain time for women's prospects.

In addition, Perrault does not go deeply into detail when it comes to the characters of the King and Queen in the original "Cinderella". They are only portrayed as flat background characters during the royal ball, where Cinderella meets the prince. In *Ever After*, King Francis is depicted as an authoritarian figure who pressures his son Henry to marry for political reasons. Queen Marie is more understanding than the King. In *Cinderella 2021*, King Rowan and Queen Beatrice are portrayed as characters who complement each other; he is depicted as authoritarian, and she is more aware of priorities. Their relationship represents the societal dynamic of the time. Finally, the fairy godmother provides magical help to Cinderella to go to the ball. The fairy godmother is depicted as a magical figure who helps Cinderella with her power and magic and transforms her circumstances to attend the ball, transforming a pumpkin into a carriage and mice into horses. The fairy godmother symbolises the hope that everything can change at any time and in any place.

When it comes to *Ever After*, there is no traditional Fairy godmother character; they replace magical elements with historical realism. Leonardo da Vinci plays the figure who helps Danielle by providing wisdom and creating her gown so she can attend the ball. (*Ever After: A Cinderella Story*)

In *Cinderella 2021* the godmother, Fabulous, is this time portrayed by Billy Porter as (Fab G), a male actor representing the LGBT agenda, a genderless figure to show the idea that “magic has no gender” Billy Porter said this statement in multiple interviews, notably with US channel CBS News in March 2020. He explained. "I think it's really special and important when we revisit these classic stories and fairy tales and things of that nature that they reflect where the culture is today, where the world is today." In both Perrault's original tale and *Cinderella 2021*, the mice that turn into horses are present to reflect the magical elements of the story. In contrast, the film *Ever After* omits this transformation and focuses more on realism. For the new characters in this 1998 version. (Porter 01:10).

There are two servant women of the house, they are kind, polite, and they love Danielle, see her as a daughter figure, and support her in her difficulties. A new character added to *Cinderella 2021* is the princess, Gwen is depicted as strong and intelligent, with spiritual ideas. She represents a strong female figure. Queen Tatiana (Beverly Knight) had a smaller role in the movie, but her presence was visible from her very first appearance. The queen had a keen eye for art, and she knew what and who had the chance to become great. Her appreciation for Ella, especially when asked to show her designs, so she could hire her. These versions show how each adaptation can represent such elements to suit contemporary themes.

3.5 Narrative Structure and Style: Comparison of narrative techniques, stylistic choices, and storytelling methods

The Cinderella story exhibits significant variation across different versions, reflecting diverse narrative styles, structures, and storytelling methods. These differences highlight how cultural contexts, authorial intentions, and historical periods shape the tale's telling and thematic emphasis.

Original Story (Perrault's *Cinderella*)

Linear Plot & Passive Protagonist: Perrault's 1697 Cinderella tale has a rigidly linear structure. He aimed to create a moral lesson for children, emphasising virtues such as kindness, patience, and the rewards of being good. His adaptation included elements that made the story more relatable to the French bourgeoisie of his time, such as the fairy godmother and the glass slipper, which are now iconic aspects of the tale. Beginning with Cinderella's abuse and ending with winning royal love and marrying the prince. Her ability to do something is minimal; her suffering appears as virtuous tolerance. For example, the storyteller asserts: "She bore it all patiently and did not dare to complain to her father"—a reflection of the 17th-century perfection of female subservience. The moral of the story: "Beauty in a woman is a rare treasure..." but graciousness is beyond price" is delivered directly, reinforcing societal expectations of passive virtue (Jackson1).

Perrault's narrative is basic and magical, focusing on the transformative power of kindness and beauty. A fairy godmother assists Cinderella in transforming, emphasising the role of external forces in her life. The story is told in a simple, didactic style, with the use of magical Intervention; the fairy godmother's transformation of a pumpkin into a carriage and mice into horses ("she tapped it with her wand, and it instantly became a splendid coach") to help rescue Cinderella from her problems. Agency distribution in the story differs from later adaptations, where it shifts to the protagonist. While using Formal Prose and Symbolism, the text employs formal, late 17th-century poetic language: "Once there was a gentleman who

married, for his second wife, the proudest and most haughty woman that was ever seen. She had, by a former husband, two daughters of her own, who were, indeed, exactly like her in all things. He had likewise, by another wife, a young daughter, but of unparalleled goodness and sweetness of temper, which she took from her mother, who was the best creature in the world.” to raise the tale’s fantastical elements, using descriptive words to enhance its narration. The glass slipper, an unattainable object, “they tried until midnight but could not get it on”, symbolizes, for example, Cinderella’s true identity, purity, and true beauty. The didactic technique used in the text presents ethical teachings of kindness and patience together with humility (“Perrault: Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper”¹). Using the Omniscient Narration the story is told in the third person narrative voice which shapes the tone of the story (“Cinderella, indeed, well dressed... was taken to be a stranger”) the narrator knows everything about the characters focusing on Cinderella but also explores the actions of other characters like the prince and the fairy godmother, this helps the reader to know everything about them and their feelings such as Cinderella’s kindness and her stepmother’s badness, Perrault’s style contributes a sense of a classic fairytale charm. (“Perrault: Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper”).

Ever After

Non-Linear Structure & Historical Realism: The film starts with a 19th-century Grimm Brothers lecture, before diving into Danielle's (Cinderella) story. Flashbacks to her father’s death (“Promise me you’ll always look after yourself”) narrate her resilience. Unlike Perrault’s tale, Danielle actively drives the plot; she rescues Prince Henry from bandits, discusses philosophy with him (“A crown is just a hat that lets the rain in”), and negotiates her freedom. Tennant uses many intertextual techniques such as allusion and appropriation. Examples of these intertextual references include reference to Thomas More’s Utopia, appropriation of The Brothers Grimm’s Cinderella, and allusion to Leonardo da Vinci and

The Brothers Grimm as characters. These techniques increase the viewer's understanding of the ideas of love, social inequality, freedom, utopian societies, and rags-to-riches and family used in *Ever After*. (Shattock n.pag.)

The movie used the subversion of magic where magical elements are replaced with Leonardo da Vinci's inventions (e.g., mechanical wings), narrating the story in Renaissance humanism. The glass slipper is gifted by the prince as a token of equality ("I would rather die than marry for advantage!"). For the Visual Symbolism and Historical Authenticity, Costume design reflects character development: Danielle's servant clothes evolve into a blue Renaissance gown, mirroring her recovery of identity, as she regains her independence with costumes to match her power. The symbolism of the books reflects her intellectual independence in contrast with her stepmother's materialism. Before Danielle's father dies, he gives her *Utopia* to read, a work of fiction and socio-political satire by Thomas More in 1478–1535, written in Latin and published in 1516. The book is a frame narrative primarily depicting a fictional island society and its religious, social, and political customs. Many aspects of More's description of Utopia are reminiscent of life in monasteries. The book is a symbol for what he trusts society can be, and it becomes the story that she goes back to almost every night to form her thoughts and to continue to stay close to her father, who is no longer with her. Another symbol appears when Prince Henry runs after a man who has stolen what is described as "a matter of life and death." It turns out that it is a painting...the Mona Lisa, and that the man is Leonardo da Vinci. The painting at first has no value to Prince Henry until he finds out that it was da Vinci who painted it. The symbol is that a work of art has no value without the link to its creator. The glass slipper symbolises her value when the prince returns it to Danielle at the end of the film after recognising her worth beyond social status, after rescuing herself from Pierre le Pieu (the man who bought her) with a sword using her wit. The film's visual setting and candle-lit scenes evoke 16th-century France, contrasting

with Perrault's delicate ball. The movie includes a conversational tone with a modern speaking style using intelligent, witty, and humorous lines to connect with current viewers; Danielle's sharp retorts ("I'd sooner swallow a razor") modernize her wit, while the prince's sensitivity ("I've been groomed since birth to be this!") humanizes royalty and communicating their inner experiences through dialogue. (*Ever After* 00:10:15–00:23:00)

While using Character-Driven Perspective, the film is set in Renaissance France, and it maintains Danielle as an active person in her own story, determining expressions during her debates with the prince ("You have the audacity to speak to me of hypocrisy?"). Prioritise emotional power. The film focuses on her emotional journey, mental growth, and moral flexibility. For example, her wit and assertion are shown through her argument with Henry on class inequality ("*If you suffer your people to be ill-educated and their manners corrupted from infancy, what else is to be expected but this?*"). The movie gives up on supernatural elements and magic like the fairy godmother, replacing in with Leonardo da Vinci's help (wings for her ball gown) and offering prudence ("*A life without love is no life at all*"), using more realistic elements to make the audience enjoying it while maintaining its romantic qualities that develops between her and the prince gradually through shared experiences rather than instant attraction. The dialogue in the movie serves as a great tool of communication between the characters, it also shades a sense of humour and empowerment, for example, Danielle's sharp replies to her stepmother ("*I would rather die a thousand deaths than see my mother's dress on that spoiled selfish cow!*"). (*Ever After: A Cinderella Story*)

The film displays its explanation through characters, providing viewers with emotional connectivity during their experience of Danielle's tale. Audience members begin experiencing understanding along with empathy about her situation.

Cinderella 2021

Meta-Narrative & Modern Agency: Kay Cannon’s adaptation is one of the latest adaptations that use modern storytelling methods, with Ella (Camila Cabello) directly hooking the audience (“This is not that kind of story”). Her goal to find a match in saying (“I don’t want a prince—I want a partner”) redirects the narrative around achieving personal goals, like her dressmaking business opening her dress shop, and the stepsister’s revolt, the story challenges gender stereotypes. The movie includes musical storytelling; in Songs like “Million to One” (Cabello), it shows her commitment to herself and her dreams even in the face of adversity. The story moves away from Perrault’s traditional morality by embracing modern concepts of survival and endurance. The climax—Ella rejecting the prince’s proposal to follow her dreams (“I can’t be your princess... I have to be me”)—subverts the original’s passive resolution. The methods used in the movie made the character more accessible to the audience. (Hawkins n.pag.)

Contemporary Aesthetic & Musical Fusion: The story combines a musical series blend with fairy-tale visuals, such as Ella’s glittering gown transformation during “Shining Star”(Porter) The stepmother's ballad “I Am a Woman” (by singer Idina Menzel) uses her voice to reveal female ambition, and Ella’s songs convey her hardships which create emotional scenes in the movie. In addition, Ella’s colourful dresses contrast with the stepfamily’s monochromatic mansion, symbolising oppression vs. self-expression, according to colour psychology.

The dialogue combines ordinary language of today with small elements of fairy-tale tone to appeal to audiences from both past and present times. Having both modern and fairy tale elements enables a better audience connection to the characters. For the Meta-Commentary and Audience Engagement, the 2021 Cinderella redefines the classic fairytale using interpretation techniques, adding a feminist twist, focusing on Cinderella and her ambitions in making her dreams come true; the story is not only about winning the love of the prince and

royal life. In addition to the musical storytelling using pop and rock hits that are not present in the original story to express ambition, enhance emotional expressions, and advance the plot in a modernised way, like Camilla Cabello's song "Million to One" (Cabello) highlights Cinderella's aspirations and dreams.

The movie integrates intersectional feminism with the new "genderless" fairy godmother (Fab G) emphasizing the idea that ("magic has no gender"), director Key Canon thinks that the LGBTQ representation in the story is necessary in such modern work because it requires incorporating present-time themes and characters that reflect the variation of today's society.

The film uses modern language, which is marked in phrases like: "Yas queen", the dialogue includes witty moments to brighten the mood and add comedic relief, for example, the godmother's line: "Let's not ruin this incredibly magical moment with reason". In general, the 2021 Cinderella version endeavours to update the classic tale in newer, more relevant subjects to better connect with the diverse target audiences. (James; Redding; Escape)

3.6 Conclusion of Comparative Analysis

The three versions of Cinderella differ from each other in many elements, including style, character dynamics, and subjects, among others. Each adaptation reflects its cultural moment. Starting with Perrault's version, which reflects Bourbon-era values, is a classic written fairy tale that sets the scene for Cinderella's personality: a kind young woman who suffers from her stepfamily, presenting themes such as kindness and inner beauty. With the magic help, she found her love, forever after, happiness, and even forgiveness towards her step-family. This narrative focuses on a magical transformation that serves as a backdrop for Cinderella's rich journey.

Ever After, on the other hand, is a historical fiction film adaptation set in Renaissance-Era France that echoes humanist feminism about a 1990s girl-power narrative. It also focuses

on realism while removing supernatural elements. Cinderella (Danielle) is portrayed as intelligent and resourceful, challenging her step-family to get her rights and independence.

As for the newer adaptation, *Cinderella* screened in 2021, is different from the two previous versions. It's a modern musical version that focuses on individualism and intersectionality. Cinderella is portrayed as a strong, independent woman who seeks to create her own business and become a fashion designer. It addresses themes like empowerment and self-determination when she meets Queen Tatiana, who offers her a dream job. This version emphasises Ella's agency and dreams rather than marriage, unlike the more traditional versions. In conclusion, the comparative analysis of Charles Perrault's Cinderella, *Ever After*, and the 2021 *Cinderella* adaptations changes deeply from traditional tales and narrative style into modern retelling style, reflecting contemporary social values.

General Conclusion

This academic dissertation analysed the historical changes of the Cinderella story. After numerous examinations of the tale, it became obvious that there is no absolute Cinderella tale. There are hundreds of alternatives globally to represent different cultures and social values of the societies in which they originated. Charles Perrault's "Cinderella" or "Cendrillon" is one of the most well-known versions that has been reinterpreted and explored in literature for centuries. While many other adaptations, such as the films *Ever After 1998* and *Cinderella 2021* versions need to be highlighted and explored more, we have contributed towards this dissertation.

The significance of this research lies in its multidisciplinary approach, combining historical contextualization, literary analysis, feminist critique, and comparative studies. We have provided both comparative and feminist analyses on empowerment and agency across the three selected versions of the Cinderella narrative. By delving into the origins of "Cinderella" and how fairytales transform from their origins in ancient oral traditions into their current forms in modern cinema. We examined how the "Cinderella" fairytale changes through time to gain a better understanding of this topic, highlighting the tale's transmission from oral folklore to written text and eventually to audio-visual media.

Using the comparative analysis and the feminist theoretical frameworks enabled us to have a critical examination of the portrayal of the Cinderella character, as well as the other key figures within each interpretation. The focus lay in providing a comprehensive explanation of how each Cinderella differ from the others, highlighting variations in theme, characterisation, and the underlying messages.

We aimed to draw attention towards the evolution of the Cinderella story from its classic origins all the way to modern adaptations. This, in turn, helped to reflect on traditional

gender roles, social expectations and cultural values, but also to highlight how newer versions of this fairytale have instrumentalised their narratives to resonate with the new generations and to fit the artistic content in which they are retold.

In conclusion, this research work explored the evolution of Cinderella across different historical and ideological periods. Examining how each interpretation reflects and conveys diverse messages to its audience and the underlying reasons behind the transformations within each story. To do so, the study used comparative and feminist qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the narrative interpretations.

By addressing the three central research questions: how does Cinderella's depiction differ across versions? What social values are reflected in character dynamics? And how are traditional gender roles challenged? This study fills a notable gap in feminist and comparative literary scholarship. It provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how a classic fairy tale can serve as a mirror to societal change, especially in terms of gender politics. Through close textual and visual analysis grounded in feminist theory, we have posited that Perrault's Cinderella is passive compared to her more autonomous modern counterparts, that the antagonistic relationships are more complex in the selected filmic adaptations, and that these contemporary versions actively challenge traditional gender roles proper to the original story.

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