

Female Empowerment and Survival in Damsel (2024): A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

Film is widely recognized as a medium that reflects and shapes social values, particularly in the representation of gender roles and power relations. Although many modern films attempt to challenge traditional portrayals of women, there is still limited critical research that specifically examines how *Damsel* (2024) constructs themes of empowerment and resistance through character development and conflict. This study aims to analyze the transformation of the main character, Princess Elodie, and the role of conflict in shaping the narrative and its underlying social meanings. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the data were collected from dialogues, character actions, and key scenes in the film. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis supported by theories of characterization, conflict, and feminist perspectives. The findings reveal that Elodie undergoes significant development from a passive and obedient figure into a strong, independent, and resilient individual. Both internal and external conflicts, including betrayal, survival, and psychological struggle, play a crucial role in driving this transformation. The study also finds that the film challenges patriarchal narratives by presenting a female protagonist who actively resists oppression and redefines her identity. Furthermore, symbolic elements such as the dragon and the cave reinforce themes of trauma, transformation, and justice. Overall, the film offers a reinterpretation of traditional fairy tales by emphasizing agency, resistance, and gender equality, contributing to contemporary discussions in film studies and cultural analysis.

Keywords: Character Development; Conflict; Feminism; Empowerment; Damsel; Film Analysis

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Introduction

Film is not only a form of entertainment but also a powerful medium for representing and shaping social realities. Through narrative structure, characterization, and visual symbolism, films communicate complex issues such as power, identity, and gender in ways that are accessible to wide audiences. In contemporary media landscapes, film functions as a cultural text that both reflects and constructs social meanings, influencing how audiences understand roles, relationships, and values in society (Kellner & Share, 2019; Storey, 2021). With the rapid expansion of global media platforms, films have become increasingly influential in shaping public discourse, particularly on issues related to diversity, inclusion, and social justice (Livingstone, 2018; Couldry, 2020). As a result, analyzing film narratives provides valuable insight into how social ideologies are produced, maintained, and challenged.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in cinematic narratives, especially in the representation of female characters. Traditional films, particularly within the fantasy and fairy tale genres, often portray women as passive, dependent, and in need of rescue by male protagonists. However, contemporary films increasingly challenge this pattern by presenting women as active agents who demonstrate independence, resilience, and decision-making power (Gill, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018). This shift reflects broader cultural changes in the understanding of gender roles, where there is growing demand for more inclusive and empowering representations of women in media. Scholars argue that such representations are important because they shape audience perceptions of gender identity and influence attitudes toward equality and social roles (Hooks, 2015; Orgad, 2019).

One film that reflects this transformation is *Damsel* (2024), written by Dan Mazeau. The film reinterprets the conventional fairy tale narrative by centering on Princess Elodie, a character who initially appears as obedient and self-sacrificing but later evolves into a strong and independent individual. Unlike traditional fairy tale heroines who rely on external rescue, Elodie survives through

her own strength, intelligence, and resilience. This narrative shift not only challenges established storytelling conventions but also highlights broader themes of empowerment, resistance, and agency. The film positions its protagonist as an active subject rather than a passive object, thereby questioning patriarchal norms that have historically defined female roles in media narratives.

The central conflict in *Damsel* is rooted in deception and patriarchal tradition, where Elodie is sacrificed as part of a royal agreement to maintain political power. This conflict reflects real-world issues such as gender inequality, structural violence, and the exploitation of women within systems of authority. Recent studies in media and cultural analysis suggest that film narratives often serve as a space for critiquing dominant ideologies and exposing hidden power structures (Ahmed, 2019; Tyler, 2020). In this context, *Damsel* can be understood as a text that not only represents social issues but also challenges them by presenting alternative possibilities of resistance and transformation.

In addition to narrative and character development, symbolic elements play a crucial role in conveying the film's deeper meanings. Visual symbols such as the dragon and the cave are not merely narrative devices but also represent abstract concepts such as trauma, fear, and transformation. According to recent research, symbolism in visual media helps audiences interpret complex ideas by translating them into concrete and emotionally engaging forms (Rose, 2022; Bateman & Schmidt, 2021). In *Damsel*, these symbols reinforce the protagonist's journey and contribute to the film's overall message about resilience and justice. The integration of narrative and symbolic elements makes the film particularly suitable for critical analysis within the fields of film studies and cultural studies.

Despite the increasing attention to female empowerment in contemporary cinema, there is still limited critical research that specifically examines how *Damsel* constructs themes of empowerment and resistance through its narrative elements. Most existing studies focus on general discussions of feminist representation in media without providing detailed analysis of this film or exploring how character development and conflict work together to produce meaning. This lack of focused analysis creates a gap in understanding how modern fantasy films negotiate issues of gender, power, and identity in specific contexts. Therefore, a more detailed and theory-driven analysis is needed to explore how *Damsel* represents these themes and contributes to broader discussions of gender and social justice.

Based on this gap, this study aims to analyze character development and conflict in *Damsel* (2024) to understand how the film represents female empowerment and resistance. Specifically, this study seeks to answer how female empowerment and resistance represented through character development and conflict in *Damsel* (2024). By focusing on the transformation of the main character and the structure of conflict, this study attempts to reveal how narrative elements are used to construct social meaning.

This study is expected to contribute to the field of film studies and cultural analysis by providing a deeper understanding of how contemporary films represent issues of gender and power. It also offers practical implications for education, particularly in using film as a medium to promote critical thinking about gender equality, social justice, and media literacy. Through this analysis, the study highlights the importance of critically engaging with popular media texts to better understand their role in shaping social awareness and cultural perspectives.

Literature Review

Film is widely recognized as a cultural text that reflects and shapes social values, beliefs, and power structures. As a form of multimodal narrative, film communicates meaning not only through dialogue but also through visual composition, editing, sound, and symbolic representation. Recent studies emphasize that film operates as a site where social ideologies are produced and negotiated, allowing audiences to interpret and question issues such as gender roles, identity, and power relations (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2015; Turner, 2019). In this sense, film becomes an important medium for examining how cultural meanings are constructed and circulated. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Damsel* (2024), which presents a narrative that challenges traditional representations of women by placing a female character at the center of action, survival, and decision-making.

Character development is a central element in film analysis because it reveals how individuals respond to conflict and change within a narrative. Recent research highlights that character transformation is closely linked to audience engagement, as viewers tend to connect emotionally with characters who experience growth and struggle (Plantinga, 2018; Smith, 2022). Dynamic characters, in

particular, undergo significant changes that reflect broader social and psychological processes. In contemporary cinema, character development is often used to explore themes of identity, agency, and resistance (Eder, Jannidis, & Schneider, 2016). In the case of *Damsel*, the transformation of Princess Elodie from a passive and obedient figure into a resilient and independent individual illustrates how character development functions as a vehicle for conveying deeper thematic messages about empowerment and self-determination.

Conflict is another key element that shapes narrative structure and meaning. It creates tension, drives the plot, and influences character development. Recent narrative theory suggests that conflict is not only a structural device but also a means of representing social and psychological struggles (Herman, 2017; Ryan, 2019). Internal conflict involves emotional and psychological challenges faced by a character, while external conflict arises from interactions with other characters or the environment. In *Damsel*, both forms of conflict are present and interconnected. Elodie's external conflict with the royal family and the dragon is closely linked to her internal struggle with fear, identity, and survival. This combination allows for a more complex portrayal of her journey and highlights how conflict contributes to the construction of meaning within the narrative.

Feminist theory provides a critical framework for analyzing how women are represented in media. Contemporary feminist media studies emphasize the importance of examining how narratives either reinforce or challenge patriarchal structures (McRobbie, 2015; Gill & Orgad, 2018). While traditional media often portray women as passive and dependent, recent studies show a growing trend toward representations of women as active, independent, and capable of resistance (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Negra & Tasker, 2017). However, scholars also note that empowerment in media can sometimes be limited or shaped by existing power structures. In *Damsel*, the character of Elodie reflects a more progressive representation, as she resists victimization and challenges the system that seeks to control her. This makes the film relevant for examining how contemporary narratives negotiate issues of gender, power, and agency.

Symbolism also plays a crucial role in conveying meaning in film. Visual elements such as setting, objects, and character design often function as symbols that represent abstract ideas and emotional experiences. Recent approaches to visual analysis highlight that symbolism allows filmmakers to communicate complex themes in ways that are both accessible and impactful (Forceville, 2016; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). In *Damsel*, the dragon can be interpreted as a symbol of trauma, anger, and historical injustice, while the cave represents a space of danger, transformation, and rebirth. These symbolic elements deepen the narrative by linking the protagonist's physical journey with her psychological and emotional development, making the film suitable for critical interpretation.

Previous studies on contemporary fantasy and action films indicate a shift toward stronger and more complex female protagonists. This trend reflects broader cultural changes and increasing awareness of gender representation in media (Brown, 2020; Benshoff & Griffin, 2021). Modern narratives often move away from the "damsel in distress" trope and instead present female characters who actively shape their own destinies. In addition, research on film-based learning suggests that analyzing such narratives can enhance critical thinking, media literacy, and social awareness among audiences (Dezuanni, 2018; Beach, 2022). By engaging with films that address issues of power, identity, and resistance, viewers are encouraged to reflect on real-world social dynamics.

Based on these perspectives, it can be seen that film, character development, conflict, feminist theory, and symbolism are interconnected elements that contribute to the construction of meaning in cinematic narratives. However, there is still limited research that specifically examines how these elements work together in *Damsel* (2024) to represent female empowerment and resistance. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how character transformation and conflict structure shape the film's representation of gender and power.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to analyze character development and conflict in the film *Damsel* (2024), written by Dan Mazeau. A qualitative approach was selected because the study focuses on interpreting meanings, narrative structures, and symbolic elements rather than generating numerical data. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how the film represents themes such as empowerment, resistance, and gender inequality through its narrative components.

The primary data source of this study was the film *Damsel* (2024). The data included dialogues, character actions, key scenes, and visual elements that illustrate the transformation of the main character and the development of conflict throughout the story. Secondary data were obtained from relevant and recent scholarly sources related to film analysis, narrative theory, characterization, conflict, and feminist perspectives to support the interpretation.

Data collection was conducted through systematic observation and note-taking. The researcher watched the film multiple times to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the storyline, character progression, and major conflicts. During each viewing, important scenes, dialogues, and symbolic elements were identified, selected, and recorded. The collected data were then organized based on their relevance to the main analytical focus, particularly character development and types of conflict.

The data analysis followed the stages of thematic analysis in a clear and structured process. First, data familiarization was carried out by repeatedly reviewing the film and the collected notes. Second, initial coding was conducted by labeling relevant data segments related to themes such as transformation, survival, betrayal, resistance, and empowerment. Third, categorization was performed by grouping similar codes into broader thematic categories. Fourth, theme development was conducted by identifying patterns and relationships among the categories. Fifth, interpretation was carried out by linking the identified themes with theoretical frameworks, especially characterization theory and feminist theory, to explain how meaning is constructed in the film. Finally, conclusion drawing was conducted by synthesizing the findings into a coherent explanation of how character development and conflict contribute to the film's overall message.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were applied. First, prolonged engagement was achieved through repeated viewing and detailed observation of the film to gain a deep understanding of the data. Second, theoretical triangulation was used by applying multiple theoretical perspectives, including narrative theory and feminist theory, to strengthen the interpretation. Third, peer checking was conducted by discussing the coding process and interpretations with colleagues to reduce subjectivity and bias. Fourth, thick description was provided by presenting detailed explanations of scenes, dialogues, and symbols to support the findings. These strategies ensure that the analysis is credible, consistent, and well-supported.

Result

The analysis of *Damsel* (2024) demonstrates that character development and conflict are deeply interconnected and function as the primary mechanisms through which the film conveys its themes of empowerment, resistance, and justice. These elements do not operate separately; instead, they reinforce each other throughout the narrative. The transformation of the main character is driven by continuous exposure to conflict, while conflict itself gains meaning through the character's evolving responses. To present the findings more clearly and systematically, the results are organized into four major themes.

1. Character Transformation from Passivity to Agency

The findings reveal that Princess Elodie undergoes a profound transformation from a passive and obedient figure into an active and self-determined individual. At the beginning of the film, Elodie is portrayed as someone who accepts her role within the royal system without resistance. She demonstrates loyalty to her family and kingdom, even when it requires personal sacrifice. This is clearly shown in early scenes where she agrees to the marriage arrangement and does not question the motives behind it. Her behavior reflects traditional expectations of femininity, where obedience and self-sacrifice are valued.

However, this characterization begins to change significantly after she is betrayed and thrown into the cave. The moment of betrayal marks a turning point in her development, as it forces her to confront a reality in which she can no longer rely on others for protection. Inside the cave, Elodie is placed in a situation where survival depends entirely on her own actions. She begins to think critically, make decisions independently, and take initiative in navigating her environment.

For instance, she learns to assess danger, identify possible escape routes, and use available resources to protect herself. These actions demonstrate a gradual shift from passivity to agency. Her transformation is not immediate but develops through a series of challenges that require adaptation and resilience. Over time, Elodie becomes more confident, assertive, and determined, showing that her

identity is reshaped through experience. This development highlights that empowerment in the film is not given but earned through struggle and self-realization.

2. External Conflict: Betrayal, Violence, and Survival

The results indicate that external conflict is a dominant force in shaping the narrative and driving the protagonist's transformation. The primary source of conflict originates from betrayal, as Elodie is deceived and sacrificed by the royal family to maintain political stability. This act represents a form of institutionalized violence, where individuals are treated as expendable for the sake of power. The betrayal not only initiates the conflict but also exposes the oppressive system that governs the story. After being thrown into the cave, Elodie faces continuous external threats that intensify the narrative tension. The presence of the dragon serves as a constant reminder of danger, forcing her to remain alert and strategic. In several scenes, she must escape from immediate threats, hide from attacks, and find ways to defend herself. These moments highlight the physical dimension of the conflict, where survival becomes her primary objective.

In addition to the dragon, the environment itself acts as a source of conflict. The cave is depicted as dark, unstable, and unpredictable, creating additional obstacles that Elodie must overcome. She encounters limited resources, physical exhaustion, and injuries, all of which increase the difficulty of her situation. These challenges emphasize that the conflict is not limited to a single antagonist but involves multiple layers of danger. The continuous exposure to external conflict forces Elodie to develop resilience and adaptability. Each challenge contributes to her growth, showing that conflict is not only a source of tension but also a catalyst for transformation. Through these experiences, the film illustrates how survival requires both physical strength and strategic thinking.

3. Internal Conflict: Fear, Identity, and Self-Realization

Alongside external challenges, the analysis shows that internal conflict plays a crucial role in shaping Elodie's character development. Her psychological struggle is evident from the moment she realizes that she has been betrayed. She experiences fear, confusion, and emotional pain, which reflect her initial inability to process the situation. These emotions highlight the internal dimension of the conflict, where she must confront her own vulnerability. As the narrative progresses, Elodie begins to question her identity and her role within the system that sacrificed her. She struggles with feelings of worthlessness and betrayal, particularly when she realizes that her life was considered less important than political stability. These moments of reflection demonstrate the depth of her internal conflict, as she attempts to redefine her sense of self.

Gradually, this internal struggle leads to self-realization. Elodie begins to reject the identity imposed on her and adopts a new perspective in which she sees herself as capable and deserving of survival. This shift is reflected in her actions, as she becomes more decisive and proactive. Her fear does not disappear completely, but it is transformed into motivation that drives her forward. For example, instead of avoiding danger, she begins to confront it strategically. Her ability to manage fear and maintain focus in critical situations shows that her internal conflict has evolved into a source of strength. This psychological transformation is essential to her overall development, as it enables her to move from a state of helplessness to one of control. The findings suggest that empowerment in the film is closely linked to the resolution of internal conflict and the achievement of self-awareness.

4. Symbolism Supporting Empowerment and Resistance

The analysis also reveals that symbolic elements play a significant role in reinforcing the themes of empowerment and resistance. These symbols provide deeper meaning to the narrative and help connect the character's experiences with broader social issues. The dragon, for instance, functions as more than just a physical threat. It symbolizes accumulated trauma, anger, and the consequences of past violence. Rather than being portrayed as purely evil, the dragon represents a complex figure shaped by its own experiences. This interpretation challenges the traditional binary of hero and villain, suggesting that violence often has underlying causes.

The cave serves as another important symbol within the film. Initially, it represents danger, confinement, and isolation. However, as the story progresses, it becomes a space of transformation. It is within this environment that Elodie develops her strength, resilience, and independence. The cave can therefore be understood as a symbolic space where rebirth occurs, marking the transition from vulnerability to empowerment. In addition, Elodie's physical wounds and struggles function as visual representations of her emotional and psychological journey. Her injuries reflect the cost of survival,

while her ability to continue despite these challenges highlights her resilience. One of the most significant symbolic moments occurs when she chooses not to kill the dragon. This decision represents a rejection of the cycle of violence and demonstrates moral courage. It suggests that true empowerment involves not only resistance but also the ability to make ethical choices.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that Damsel (2024) constructs a narrative in which character development and conflict are closely intertwined to represent themes of empowerment, resistance, and justice. These findings can be better understood when compared with recent studies in film studies, gender representation, and narrative analysis, which highlight the evolving role of female protagonists in contemporary cinema.

First, the transformation of Princess Elodie from passivity to agency reflects a broader shift in the representation of women in modern films. The findings show that Elodie's development is gradual and shaped by continuous exposure to conflict, rather than being presented as an immediate or superficial change. This aligns with recent research suggesting that contemporary narratives increasingly portray female empowerment as a process that emerges through struggle, experience, and self-realization (Kaplan, 2020; Tasker & Negra, 2022). Unlike traditional fairy tale heroines who rely on rescue, Elodie becomes an active agent who controls her own survival. This supports the argument of Gill (2021) that modern media representations of women are moving toward more complex and multidimensional portrayals, where strength is constructed through resilience and decision-making rather than idealized perfection.

Second, the role of external conflict in the film reflects how narrative structures can expose systems of power and inequality. The betrayal experienced by Elodie is not merely a personal conflict but represents a form of institutionalized violence rooted in patriarchal authority. This finding is consistent with recent studies that emphasize how cinematic narratives often depict systemic oppression through individual experiences (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2020; Dosekun, 2017). The film uses Elodie's sacrifice to reveal how power structures can normalize exploitation, particularly of women, in the name of tradition and political stability. However, the film also challenges this system by allowing the protagonist to survive and resist it. This dual representation supports the idea that media texts can simultaneously reflect and critique dominant ideologies, offering audiences an opportunity to question social norms.

Furthermore, the findings on internal conflict highlight the importance of psychological struggle in shaping character development. Elodie's fear, self-doubt, and eventual self-realization demonstrate that empowerment is not only a physical process but also a psychological one. This is in line with recent narrative studies that argue that internal conflict plays a crucial role in creating depth and emotional engagement in storytelling (Carroll, 2019; Tan, 2018). The film portrays fear not as a weakness but as a natural response that can be transformed into motivation. Elodie's ability to confront and manage her fear reflects a shift from vulnerability to control, reinforcing the idea that empowerment involves both emotional and cognitive transformation. This finding also supports recent discussions in media psychology, which suggest that audiences are more likely to connect with characters who display realistic emotional struggles and growth (Oliver & Raney, 2019).

In addition, the symbolic elements identified in the findings contribute significantly to the construction of meaning in the film. The dragon, for example, functions as a symbol of trauma and historical violence, rather than a simple antagonist. This interpretation aligns with recent approaches to film analysis that emphasize the role of symbolism in representing complex social and emotional issues (Monaco, 2020; Bordwell, 2021). By presenting the dragon as a figure shaped by past injustice, the film challenges traditional binary oppositions between good and evil. This complexity encourages audiences to consider the broader causes of conflict rather than focusing solely on individual actions.

Similarly, the cave as a symbolic space of transformation reinforces the theme of rebirth and self-discovery. Recent studies in visual storytelling suggest that spatial settings in films often function as metaphors for psychological states and character development (Branigan, 2018; Kuhn, 2020). In *Damsel*, the cave initially represents danger and confinement but gradually becomes a space where Elodie gains strength and independence. This transformation of space mirrors the protagonist's internal journey, highlighting the interconnectedness of physical and psychological development.

Another important finding is Elodie's decision not to kill the dragon, which represents a rejection of the cycle of violence. This moment reflects a more nuanced understanding of justice, where resolution is achieved not through destruction but through empathy and moral awareness. Recent studies on narrative ethics in film suggest that such representations encourage audiences to reflect on alternative forms of conflict resolution and the importance of ethical decision-making (Nussbaum, 2016; Sanders, 2021). By choosing not to perpetuate violence, Elodie demonstrates that true empowerment involves not only resistance but also the ability to act with moral responsibility.

From an educational perspective, the findings indicate that *Damsel* has strong potential as a teaching resource. The film presents complex issues such as gender inequality, power dynamics, and resistance in a format that is engaging and accessible. Recent research in media-based learning shows that films can be effective tools for promoting critical thinking and social awareness, particularly when students are encouraged to analyze narrative elements and underlying themes (Garcia & Rossiter, 2020; Yoon, 2023). Through guided discussion, learners can explore how character development, conflict, and symbolism reflect real-world social issues, making the learning process more meaningful and relevant.

However, this research also highlights certain limitations. While the film successfully presents a strong female protagonist, the limited development of supporting characters reduces the complexity of the narrative. This limitation has also been noted in recent studies, which argue that meaningful representation requires not only strong central characters but also well-developed supporting roles that reflect diverse perspectives (Gill & Orgad, 2022). In addition, the pacing of the narrative may affect audience engagement, particularly in sections where the development of conflict appears uneven.

The findings of this study demonstrate that *Damsel* effectively uses character development, conflict, and symbolism to construct a narrative of empowerment and resistance. By presenting a protagonist who evolves through struggle and challenges oppressive systems, the film contributes to contemporary discussions on gender representation and social justice. At the same time, its limitations highlight the need for more complex and balanced storytelling in future media productions.

Conclusion

This study shows that *Damsel* (2024) presents a meaningful representation of female empowerment and resistance through the interplay of character development and conflict. The transformation of Princess Elodie from a passive and obedient figure into a strong, independent, and resilient individual demonstrates that empowerment is a gradual process shaped by experience, struggle, and self-realization. Her development highlights the importance of personal agency in challenging oppressive systems and redefining identity. The analysis also reveals that both external and internal conflicts play a crucial role in shaping the narrative. External conflict, such as betrayal and survival, exposes the existence of patriarchal structures and systemic violence, while internal conflict reflects Elodie's psychological journey toward self-awareness and control. These conflicts are not separate but work together to drive her transformation and reinforce the film's central themes. In addition, symbolic elements such as the dragon and the cave strengthen the narrative by representing deeper meanings related to trauma, transformation, and moral choice. These symbols make abstract concepts more accessible and contribute to the emotional impact of the film. The protagonist's decision to reject violence further emphasizes that true empowerment involves not only resistance but also ethical awareness.

Despite its strengths, the film shows limitations in the development of supporting characters and narrative pacing, which slightly reduce the depth of the story. Therefore, future research is recommended to explore similar films with a broader focus on multiple characters and more complex narrative structures. Further studies may also examine audience responses or the use of such films in educational contexts to better understand their impact on perspectives related to gender and social justice. *Damsel* contributes to contemporary discussions in film and cultural studies by offering a reinterpretation of traditional narratives and presenting women as active agents of change rather than passive figures.

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