

**Thinking Object: How much is Cinderella to blame for the bad situation she finds herself in?**

**This thinking object is the second in a series of three, following the thinking object titled [How much is Cinderella's father to blame for her situation?](#)**

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**Text:** *Cinderella: An Art Deco Love Story* by Lynne Roberts and David Roberts (Pavilion: Great Britain 2003)

The following teachers' notes are a guide for teachers to facilitate an interpretive conversation with their students in class by making use of the morally unresolved (disputable and therefore engaging) nature of ambiguous characters. The focus in this instance is on visual analysis rather than analysis of the written text. As with literary analysis, an interpretive environment in the classroom is created. The right of students to have different visual interpretations and opinions is encouraged, as is the serious discussion of these interpretations.

Analysing images is a subjective interpretive process. Images are created through someone's perspective, and are in turn are interpreted differently as we bring our own perspectives to bear in the interpretation process. There is no natural relationship between an image and its meaning, the meaning of an image is constructed through our response to it. To construct meaning we draw on past knowledge and experiences, both cultural and individual. This means that students using the same visual descriptors to illustrate a point may come up with different interpretations.

Although there can be many different meanings made from a single image, it is important in creating a constructive and critical analysis to indicate how you have interpreted the image to make meaning from it. It is also important to note what is excluded as well as included from the images. What is not in an image can say just as much or even more than what is.

The framework below provides a means for analysing the images in *Cinderella: An Art Deco Love Story*. There are different ways of approaching an image, depending on what you are looking for or concentrating on. It is a good idea to focus your inquiry when looking at images rather than trying to explain every single thing that is going on. In this instance, look at the images with this question in mind: **How much is Cinderella to blame for the bad situation she finds herself in?**

Any interpretation of the question of Cinderella's blame will fall somewhere along a scale from her being totally to blame for the bad situation she finds herself in at one

end, to being absolutely blameless at the other. An interpretation which places blame on her is called a less sympathetic reading of her character in the examples below. An interpretation which sees her as largely blameless is called a more sympathetic reading of her character.

Students should follow steps 1, 2 and 3 below with the question of Cinderella's degree of blame in mind.

- 1) **What** is going on in the foreground and background?
- 2) **How** do visual descriptors illustrate this point?
- 3) **My interpretation**

Here are some examples of visual descriptors:

- Colour:** symbolism, e.g., a dark-looking room to indicate it is not a nice place.
- Shape:** a sharp angle, e.g., a pointy shoe could be interpreted as a reflection of a 'pointy' character, that is, someone who is 'sharp' in some way: nasty, stingy or bossy, etc.
- Body language:** posture, expressions, e.g., eyebrows furrowed showing that the character is angry.
- Appearance:** clothing, shoes, jewellery, etc. or lack thereof.
- Features:** eyes, lips, nose, teeth, mouth - what do these tell you about a character?
- Movement:** waving arms, pulling at something, picking up papers - the way characters move can say something about them.

Look at visual descriptors when analysing the following components of images.

- **Interactions/actions/lack of action**

**Example** (sympathetic reading of her character): Page 10. (**What is going on?**) Cinderella rushes outside to tell her stepfamily about the ball. (**How do visual descriptors illustrate this point?**) Cinderella waves her duster and rag as she runs outside with a big smile on her face. (**My interpretation**) Cinderella leaps at the opportunity the ball provides for her to reverse her predicament. She is actively seeking to improve her bad situation and can't be blamed for accepting or encouraging the bad things that happen to her.

- **Comparative analysis** - comparing images and comparing things inside an image.

**Example** (less sympathetic reading of her character): Page 6. (**What?**) Cinderella takes away Elvira and Ermintrude's coats and hats. (**How?**) Cinderella raises an eyebrow in a superior way as she looks at the sisters over her shoulder. Cinderella is put together impeccably, whereas the sisters are wearing over the top accessories, piles of jewellery, and flashy clothes that are ill fitted. (**My interpretation**) Cinderella immediately assumes she is superior by judging the sisters on their appearances. She is not welcoming or kind to them and they treat her with the same respect in return. She attracts the bad treatment she receives.

- **Objects** - what do they represent/symbolise? Look at the relationships of characters to objects and their surroundings.

**Example** (less sympathetic reading of her character): Page 17. (**What?**) The kindly woman transforms Cinderella's rags into a "beautiful gown." (**How?**) Cinderella's eyes are wide with delight as she looks down at her new finery while prancing and billowing her shawl behind her. (**My interpretation**) All it took to erase Cinderella's concerns was to be supplied with a beautiful dress. She is lazy and shallow and has taken no responsibility for changing her situation.

- **Perspective** - from who's perspective; framing of the image, angles, etc.

**Example** (less sympathetic reading of her character): Page 8. (**What?**) Cinderella sits alone in the kitchen in front of the fire. (**How?**) The image gives the viewer a downward perspective on Cinderella. (**My interpretation**) This is symbolic of Cinderella being demoted, because she is at the bottom of a high space. However, she still has considerable resources at her disposal: shelter, privacy, endless hot tea, a pet, a fancy radio and a bed. She is not imprisoned or starved. Her inability to take positive action is her own doing. She is happy to sit and drink tea rather than improve her situation.

- **Spatial relationships** - of characters to each other as well as in their surroundings.

**Example** (less sympathetic reading of her character): Page 14. (**What?**) Cinderella despairs in the kitchen as the stepfamily leave for the ball. (**How?**) This time Cinderella is inside looking out, a large single tear drips down her cheek, as she looks out the window, longingly. (**My interpretation**) Cinderella fails to take any action to change her predicament. She weeps and remains confined to the kitchen.

- **Narrative** - images in relation to one another.

**Example:** (less sympathetic reading of her character): Page 31. (**What?**) A framed wedding photo of Cinderella, the prince and the step-sisters as bridesmaids. (**How?**) Cinderella's father is absent from the wedding photo. He has been replaced by the prince. (**My Interpretation**) Cinderella took no responsibility for the bad situation she experienced. She is finally happy because she has a man to provide her with the comforts of life that she is accustomed to, which her father used to do. Her loss of security was linked to a loss of a male figure in her life. She was vulnerable and virtually helpless without male protection. Her helplessness invited the abuse she received.

**Teachers' Notes.** Using the methods outlined above, the following is a more extended visual analysis of the question: **How much is Cinderella to blame for the bad situation she finds herself in?**

Page #	A sympathetic reading of her character	A less sympathetic reading of her character
1&2 Bird & cat	Greta's kindness and happiness are evident in the way the bird and cat have come to her. She has gained their trust through kindness. This gentleness of hers will cause her to suffer upon the arrival of the stepmother and stepsisters.	She is never seen to be as close and content with anyone else in the house as she is with these animals. She lacks human company. She has not taken advantage of all the opportunities her comfortable life offers her to do something constructive or creative. She is content to drift, and will drift into a servant's

		role.
2 With cat	Greta is seen in a high enclosed room, similar in some ways to the high and isolated bird's cage. The extensive grounds seen through the window indicate her considerable wealth. She is like a bird in a gilded cage who does not know how to handle the real world.	Greta lives a life of leisure in which she reads books, wears fine clothes, jewels, high heels, and has impeccable makeup and hair. This reflects that she does not do any practical work. She is unlikely to clean up the cat prints – servants will do this for her, and servants will maintain the extensive garden seen through the window.  She loves a life of privilege which she doesn't really deserve. She hasn't earned it herself. Her contact with the real world will reveal the basic flaws in her character which her life of leisure both conceals and enables.
4 Picking up scrolls	She picks up her father's documents and glasses when he drops them. She helps him. She is a kind person who suffers for simply being kind.	Her father seems oblivious of her help but she does not try and impose any sense of personal responsibility on him which would benefit both of them. She is content to let things slide, with disastrous results.
5 & 6 Carrying away stepsisters coats and hats	Her natural impulse to welcome and play host by taking away the coats and hats is subverted by the stepmother into giving her the role of a servant.  The step-mother and daughters are evil, mean, cruel, and self-centred, which is represented by their appearance.  Their darkly made-up eyes imply that they are crafty, cunning and	Greta looks over her shoulder at her stepsisters with an arched eyebrow, as if she is silently passing judgement on them. She does not appear to welcome or engage with them in a meaningful way. Through her aloofness she helps to create the role of servant for herself.  Cinderella's look of superiority over her shoulder means that she immediately judged them by their appearances. This means her character is not beautiful, merely her appearance is. We should not feel sympathy for her plight, which she has brought on

	<p>shrewd; their malevolent nature is expressed in their narrow pinched lips; their pointy shoes hint that they are deceitful dishonest immoral and corrupted. Their pointy noses and chins suggest that they are vulgar and uncouth; their sharply angled clothes and bodies give away that they are unrefined and lack social grace; and their little bellies overhanging their dresses reveal their greedy and parasitic nature. These sharp physical traits and blemishes reflect their sharp and blemished characters. By contrast, Cinderella is blond, and although slim, she is curvier, which reveals her softer nature. She represents light and gentleness. She is innocent in the face of evil and does not know how to deal with her stepmother and stepsisters.</p>	<p>herself by relying on appearance rather than action.</p>
<p>7 Stepsisters rip shawl</p>	<p>When Elvira and Ermintrude rip her shawl in half, Greta looks into the room with a pained look. She has been demoted and is now outside and looking in. She has become a periphery character in her new role of servant. There is a new power balance and there is nothing she can do but try and ride the situation out.</p>	<p>Greta does not make the slightest attempt to protect her property. Her passivity encourages the stepmother to change her role in the house and then change her name to Cinderella. Her lack of resistance inspires more and more ill treatment.</p>
<p>8 Cindy sits by stove</p>	<p>The downward perspective of the image gives the impression of Cinderella as oppressed because she is at the bottom of a high space. She is confined to the kitchen, which is a room of low</p>	<p>She accepts having to sleep by the fire to keep warm. She will not defend her right to the most basic needs.</p>

	<p>status in the house. Although the pegged out washing is symbolic of her fall in social status, she has really only traded one form of seclusion for another. Ever since her childhood when her mother died, the only thing she has really understood is isolation. She is used to being lonely and doesn't complain about it.</p>	
<p>9 Cindy dusts radio</p>	<p>Cinderella's eyes light up when she hears about the prince's ball. She seizes on the opportunity to improve her situation as soon as it presents itself.</p>	<p>Her enthusiasm for the ball is not due to a sense of opportunity for escape because she immediately runs out to tell her persecutors - her stepmother and stepsisters - about it. She simply likes balls.</p>
<p>10 Cindy runs outside to card- playing stepfamily</p>	<p>Cinderella shows the goodness of her heart by dashing outside to tell her stepfamily about the ball. She wants the best for everyone, even those who abuse her.</p>	<p>By running out and telling her stepfamily about the ball, she ruins any advantage this information she might have given her. She is not generous but dim.</p>
<p>11 &amp; 12 Stepsisters prepare by mirror</p>	<p>Cinderella looks upset as she helps the sisters prepare for the ball, Despite knowing that she won't go herself, she is prepared to help. She is selfless. She suffers in noble silence because there is no point in complaining.</p>	<p>Cinderella looks upset but remains silent. What does she have to lose by making her opinion known? By helping her stepsisters she is validating and encouraging their bad treatment of her.</p>
<p>14 Cindy looks out the kitchen window</p>	<p>Cinderella's plight is summarised in this picture. She is reduced to wearing rags and living in the kitchen. The stepmother looks back from the car with a triumphant smile because her plan</p>	<p>Cinderella still has home comforts: a copy of Vogue is seen poking out of her pocket and there is Olvaltine (chocolate drink) on the shelf. This indicates that she still has some resources available to her in the house. Her stepmother is seen leaving in the car so there</p>

	to exclude Cinderella has worked. Her large single tear indicates her suffering and the dignity and poise she maintains in the face of hardship. She is coping well with a terrible situation.	is no one forcing her to stay in the kitchen. Why can't she retrieve some of her clothes from her stepsisters' rooms and go to the ball alone? She is paralysed. All she can do is cry.
15 The appearance of the kindly woman.	The appearance of the "kindly woman" is the reward for Cinderella's goodness and beauty. She is justly rewarded.	Cinderella is so passive in dealing with her predicament that it takes the magical intervention of "a kindly woman" to allow her to attend the ball.
16 The vermin, worms and leek.	Although there is magical intervention, Cinderella still has to find the rat and mice, etc, which shows she is resourceful and works quickly and efficiently. When she is given an opportunity she takes it with both hands.	There are mice or mousetraps in many illustrations. She is practically tripping over vermin. Anyone could have found them! And the glow worms are already sitting on the kitchen shelf above the toaster.
17 Her ball dress	She is not only beautiful in her ball dress, but graceful in her movements as well. Grace is a quality her stepfamily lack and money can't buy. Cinderella is graceful under pressure.	Cinderella is delighted with her new dress. It seems to completely erase all of her serious domestic problems in the blink of an eye. This indicates that she is ditzy. She lacks a serious and intelligent perspective on life, hence her ill treatment.
19 & 20 Prince sees Cindy across the crowded room	Prince Roderick spots Cinderella across the ballroom. He is not yet at the bottom of the stairs so he has probably been stopped in his tracks by her beauty. She is the best woman in the room. Her qualities of grace and dignity show in the way she carries herself, but	Cinderella catches the eye of the prince because of her appearance rather than who she really is. His choice has nothing to do with anything she says or does, or any quality of her character. She is passive and relies on her appearance. These traits of hers work with the prince but have not worked at home with her stepfamily.

	<p>she also has social attributes that reflect well on her character. Her stepsisters dance awkwardly, the woman at the back of the room is over weight, her two companions stand with their legs apart like men, and many of the women are busy eating in an unladylike manner. The pair in front of Cinderella appear to be older and more sophisticated, as if they have a dubious past, or have at least had previous relationships. In contrast, Cinderella is dressed in virginal white and looks shy and innocent; she seems unable to turn and face the prince directly. She is beautiful both physically and in her poise. Her youthful beauty and grace is both her strength and weakness. It is the reason the prince wants to marry her and the reason her stepfamily abused her.</p>	
21 They dance	<p>They are dancing what appears to be a tango, a passionate and powerful dance in which the woman takes an active role. They are making close eye contact which indicates a deep level of understanding. Cinderella is an active and willing participant in this romance. She is in charge of her life and makes the best choices.</p>	<p>They are dancing with their mouths firmly shut. Cinderella is saying nothing. No thoughts, ideas or opinions are being exchanged. She doesn't even tell him her name. The eye contact summarises the trivial appearance-based nature of their relationship. Furthermore, the prince is smiling whereas Cinderella looks quite non-committal. She is playing the passive role she always plays.</p>
25 Cindy brings tea to table	<p>Cinderella's prim expression and tidy dress give no sign of her having danced the night away. It is a wise decision not to tell her stepfamily what really happened</p>	<p>Cinderella fools her stepfamily by simply saying nothing, as she usually does in all situations – her mode of operation is to say nothing. She doesn't stand up for her rights, she just keeps on serving.</p>

	<p>after the last time she offered information about the prince. As well as proof of her sound tactical decision-making, this is proof of her compassion. Her stepfamily is suffering enough anyway without her adding needless pain. She consistently makes decisions that turn out good for her and are also good in a moral sense.</p>	
<p>29 Cindy tries on the slipper</p>	<p>She looks beautiful she tries on the slipper. Even though she is wearing servant's clothes she is very stylish and elegant. Her beauty is a personal quality rather than a product of the clothes and make-up she wears. She has chosen the perfect moment to reveal this true beauty. A certain amount of suffering was inevitable but she triumphed in the end.</p>	<p>Cinderella looks nice but all she has actually done here is sneaked out the laundry and tried on her own shoe. This is the limited kind of initiative she is capable of taking.</p>
<p>31 The wedding photo</p>	<p>The wedding photo shows that Ermintrude and Elvira were Cinderella's bridesmaids. This attests to Cinderella's "forgiving nature". As Alexander Pope said: 'To err is human; to forgive is divine.' Her natural beauty and gentleness placed her in what seemed to be an unavoidable predicament, but her merits, which included humility and the ability to work hard, also invited the supernatural intervention which allowed her to escape and find happiness. She deserved everything to turn out well for her</p>	<p>The father is absent in the wedding photo; he has been replaced by the prince. She is finally happy because she has a man who has allowed her upward mobility and brings stability and security to her life. But this does not mean that she has taken any responsibility for herself as an independent adult – which is the reason she found herself in the predicament she was in. Cinderella's willingness to be a doormat played a very large part in her being treated like one.</p>

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