

Thinking Object: How malicious is Cinderella's stepfamily?

This thinking object is the third 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 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 malicious is Cinderella's stepfamily?**

Any interpretation of the question of the stepfamily's maliciousness will fall somewhere along a scale from them seriously malicious at one end, to being not at all malicious at the other. An interpretation which concludes that they are malicious is

called a less sympathetic reading of their characters in the examples below. An interpretation which sees them as not malicious is called a more sympathetic reading of their 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 (less sympathetic reading of their characters): Page 7. (**What is going on?**) The sisters fight over Cinderella's possessions. (**How do visual descriptors illustrate this point?**) There is a broken record on the floor; Elvira pinches her lips, gnashes her teeth, furrows her eyebrows and tugs the shawl towards her. Ermintrude grips onto the other end, clenching her eyes shut as they rip the shawl. (**My interpretation**) This shows that the sisters are very malicious, as they are determined to get what they want, even if it means breaking things that belong to other people. They don't care if their actions hurt others.

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

Example (sympathetic reading of their characters): (**What?**) The stepsisters dance vigorously at the ball (Page 19) and Cinderella gracefully dances with the prince (page 20). (**How?**) Cinderella holds eye contact with the prince, and dances in correct form whereas the sisters are hunched over. Elvira is baring her teeth and Ermintrude is so uncoordinated her accessories are flinging around. (**My interpretation**) The sisters reveal their determination and ambition by trying so hard to be noticed, whereas Cinderella's dancing looks effortless. This shows that the sisters are not really malicious, but instead are disadvantaged by their looks and upbringing, so are being active in trying to attract the prince. They are simply trying hard.

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

Example (sympathetic reading of their characters): Page 5. (**What?**) The stepfamily and their dog arrive on the scene. (**How?**) The stepmother carefully holds the dog, which is obviously groomed and cared for, as she steps out of the car. (**My interpretation**) They care for their dog, which is included in the family unit, well fed and loved. They are not malicious people.

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

Example (less sympathetic reading of their characters): 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 oppressed, because she is at the bottom of a high space. Her stepfamily is malicious for confining her in the lowest rung of the household: the kitchen.

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

Example (less sympathetic reading of their characters): Page 7. (**What?**) This is the first image in which Greta is represented in her new role as Cinderella. (**How?**) She is carrying laundry and wearing servant clothes with an unhappy expression on her face; and she is also represented on the outside looking in the window. By comparing this to page 2, where she is in her secluded room, sheltered from her future reality, her transition from a life of leisure to one of physical work is shown. (**My**

interpretation) Cinderella's step-family is truly malicious; they have taken her comfortable life from her and have forced her to become their servant.

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

Example: The illustration above of page 7 is also an example of **Narrative**, as you have to have looked at the previous images to understand the social transition Cinderella has made in regards to the spaces she is portrayed in. Understanding narrative is about making connections between images and their components to construct meaning.

Teachers' Notes. Using the methods outlined above, the following is a more extended visual analysis of the question: **How malicious is Cinderella's Stepfamily?**

Page #	A less sympathetic reading of their characters (i.e., they are malicious)	A more sympathetic reading of their characters (i.e., they aren't malicious)
5 & 6 (the arrival)	<p>The stepmother and daughters are evil, mean, cruel, and self-centred, which is represented by their appearance.</p> <p>Their darkly made-up eyes imply that they are crafty, cunning and 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. Their sharp physical traits and their blemishes reflect their sharp and blemished characters. They have malicious looks on their faces and even the cat is seen dashing out</p>	<p>Cinderella raises an eyebrow in a superior way when she takes away her stepsisters' coats and hats. The stepfamily has just arrived on the scene and they are immediately judged on their appearance. This is shallow and unjust.</p>

	<p>of the picture away from them.</p> <p>They are wearing over the top accessories, piles of jewellery, flashy clothes, and the stepmother carries a 'toy' dog with her. The nastiness of her dog is a reflection of her own character, just as Cinderella's cat's behaviour is symbolic of her gentle nature.</p> <p>They lack the class and grace displayed by Cinderella, as they do not come from the same kind of privileged background. They are nouveau riche and it is obvious by their poor and excessive taste, which is reflected in their miss-matched accessories. No matter how much material wealth they have now, they are uncultured. They lack an 'education' in aesthetics, and this clearly comes across in how they present themselves. They present a thin veneer of respectability to the world to hide their maliciousness.</p>	
<p>7 (stepsisters rip shawl)</p>	<p>The stepmother allows her daughters to take over Cinderella's room and possessions. The sisters fight so viciously over a shawl of Cinderella's, they rip it in two. In their scramble to claim Cinderella's possessions they also smash a record, which reflects their disregard for anyone or anything that gets in the way of what they want.</p> <p>Elvira's pinched lips, gnashing teeth and furrowed eyebrows are symbolic of her determination to get what she wants no matter how much her</p>	<p>The stepmother is a single mother with two daughters, and most likely married Cinderella's father for security. She is just trying to get the best for her two daughters in a society in which women are valued for their youth and beauty and not much else. Without a father the stepsisters have been deprived of security and material possessions, so it's understandable that they would squabble over new clothes.</p> <p>You have got to have teeth to survive when you are the 'underdog'. Unlike Cinderella, who is not represented with</p>

	<p>actions might hurt others.</p> <p>They are pushing Cinderella out of her place in the family home, and have demoted her to the position of a servant. This action reflects their cold and cruel natures.</p>	<p>teeth in any of the images, Elvira bares hers on occasion. She has serious ambition, and knows that to endure and be successful as a woman she may have to be ruthless in the short term for long term gains.</p>
10 (playing cards)	<p>The stepmother and her daughters are dressed up and playing cards in the sun while Cinderella works. They are lazy and spoiled.</p>	<p>They have taken her life of leisure and, though they may not behave well in doing so, they are living like Cinderella used to.</p> <p>They have a similar agenda to Cinderella. They want security and comfort. The major difference between them is that the stepsisters take action because they understand the competitive nature of life for the less privileged, whereas Cinderella does not because of her privileged upbringing, good looks and status as an only child.</p>
11 & 12 (preparing for the ball)	<p>As the stepsisters prepare for the ball, they order Cinderella to run around after them, and they use her finery. They intentionally stop Cinderella from attending the ball because she is more beautiful than them. They prove themselves to be bossy thieves who are jealous and vindictive.</p>	<p>The piles of high fashion clothing, cosmetics crammed on the dresser, and the jewellery, gloves and hosiery that is hanging out of draws and littering the floor, are symbols of excessive material consumption. These used to be Cinderella's possessions. The stepsisters cannot be demonised for engaging in Cinderella's past lifestyle. She used to live like they are now, and she looks on with jealousy.</p> <p>Cinderella is not allowed to the ball because they are insecure, due to living in a society that values women for their looks. Cinderella already has the security of her privileged upbringing, her father and her material wealth. They have none of these things. Cinderella's defining</p>

		characteristic, 'beauty', is more highly valued than hard work, decisive action, and determination: traits which could be attributed to the stepsisters.
13 (leaving for the ball)	The walking stick that the stepmother carries on her way to the ball is a symbol of masculine power. She has overturned Cinderella's father's authority. The walking stick represents the control the wicked stepmother has over Cinderella.	They are courageous women, who have fought in a male-dominated society to gain their new found social status.
19 & 20 (the ball)	The sisters make a spectacle of themselves with their dancing. Elvira is looking directly at the prince with a scheming look on her face. They reveal their gracelessness and cold-hearted ambition by trying so hard to be noticed.	The two sisters dance vigorously in the middle of the dance floor right in the line of the prince's vision. They are assertive women who are proactively trying to attract his attention. They do not have much choice. Their mother has made it clear through her own actions (by marrying Cinderella's father) that they must marry a man, not only for upward mobility, but to have security and stability in their lives.