

BREAKING THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS STEREOTYPE: EXPLORING GENDER AND SOCIAL CLASS DYNAMICS IN NETFLIX'S *DAMSEL*

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ABSTRACT. The "damsel in distress" trope has been prevalent in literature and media for centuries. This stereotype portrays young female characters as needing rescue by male protagonists, who are often depicted as coming from a higher social class. This archetype has become deeply ingrained in societal consciousness, shaping perceptions of gender roles and social hierarchies throughout history. Adopting critical analysis and taking feminist outlooks on gender and social class dynamics, this study examines the portrayal of Elodie, a character that deviates from the classic "damsel in distress" archetype, in the recently released Netflix film *Damsel* (2024). This study aims to analyze how Elodie is depicted in *Damsel* and explore how the film challenges conventional gender and social class norms to prove that the film breaks the damsel stereotype. The study concludes that Elodie breaks away from traditional gender and social class expectations, presenting a more empowered depiction of femininity.

Keywords: Damsel in distress, Damsel stereotype, Gender, Social class, Representation

MEMATAHKAN STEREOTIP *DAMSEL IN DISTRESS*: MENJELAJAHI DINAMIKA GENDER AND KELAS SOSIAL DALAM FILM NETFLIX *DAMSEL*

ABSTRAK. Kiasan "damsel in distress" telah digunakan secara luas dalam kesusastraan dan media selama berabad-abad. Stereotip ini menggambarkan karakter wanita muda yang perlu diselamatkan oleh karakter pria, yang sering digambarkan berasal dari kelas sosial yang lebih tinggi. Arketipe ini telah tertanam dalam kesadaran masyarakat, membentuk persepsi tentang peran gender dan hierarki sosial. Dengan menggunakan analisis kritis dan perspektif feminis tentang dinamika gender dan kelas sosial, penelitian ini mengkaji penggambaran Elodie, karakter yang menyimpang dari arketipe klasik "damsel in distress", dalam film Netflix berjudul *Damsel* (2024). Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan bagaimana Elodie digambarkan dalam *Damsel* dan mengeksplorasi bagaimana film ini menantang norma-norma gender dan kelas sosial konvensional. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Elodie melepaskan diri dari ekspektasi gender dan kelas sosial tradisional, dan menampilkan penggambaran femininitas yang lebih berdaya.

Kata-kata kunci: *Damsel in distress*, Stereotip, Gender, Kelas sosial, Representasi

INTRODUCTION

In literary works, female characters are often depicted as inferior to male protagonists. Such portrayal is closely tied to gender roles as well as social class issues within societal norms. Despite portrayals of independent female protagonists in contemporary literature and film, gender roles and social class in literature and film remain issues that need addressing. According to Blackstone (2003), societal norms and expectations are important in shaping and determining the appropriate gender roles assigned to individuals based on their perceived sex. These norms are profoundly deep-rooted in cultural traditions, historical practices, and institutional structures, influencing how individuals are socialized and the roles they are expected to fulfill within society (Blackstone, 2003). The construction of

gender roles is not arbitrary but reflects broader societal beliefs and values regarding masculinity and femininity (Blackstone, 2003). For example, the oldest daughter of a Lord needs to be wed to a Prince from a royal family to save her people. Why does a woman only have marriage as an option to save her people? Why does it have to be a man from a higher social class? These questions demonstrate the interrelationship between gender roles and social class in literature, showing how societal norms and power dynamics shape storytelling.

The example above is taken from Netflix's newly released film, *Damsel* (2024). Written by Dan Mazeau, the film follows the story of Elodie, the female protagonist who accepts a marriage proposal from a royal family in hopes of saving her people. However, her plan takes a dark turn when she finds

herself in a daunting fight for survival after being sacrificed to a fire-breathing dragon. While bearing the title *Damsel*, a term frequently associated with the "damsel in distress" trope, the film challenges this traditional archetype. Considering the film's recent release, researching its issues, particularly gender and social class dynamics, would be worthwhile. Studies in gender appear to be of widespread interest and typically intertwine with other topics such as education (Acker, 1987; Weaver-Hightower, 2003), race (Gebbru, 2020; Stepan, 1993), leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2011; Eagly & Johnson, 1990), and social class (Constantine, 2002; Reay, 1998). For example, a study by Weaver-Hightower (2003) touches on both male and female students' educational achievements, social development, and schooling experiences (Weaver-Hightower, 2003). Stephan (1993) examines gender and racial diversity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As for gender and leadership, Eagly & Jonson (1990) compare the leadership styles of women and men (Eagly & Jonson, 1990). Griffin, FUhrer, Stansfeld, & Marmot (2022) link gender with social class, examining whether depression and anxiety are influenced by low control in both professional and domestic spheres across different gender and social class categories. Despite the breadth of research in these areas, a notable need remains for more literature focused on works like *Damsel* (2024). This is partly due to the recent release of the film. This gap underscores the need to explore further how gender roles and social class dynamics are portrayed and addressed in contemporary narratives, prompting the current study to bridge this critical research gap.

This study explores the portrayal of the main female character, Elodie, in the film *Damsel* (2024). By closely examining Elodie's character development and interactions within the narrative, the research aims to shed light on how the film challenges conventional gender roles and social class norms. By analyzing key scenes and character dynamics, the study seeks to uncover how the film subverts traditional storytelling tropes. The ultimate objective is to confirm that the film presents an empowering depiction of its female protagonist, contrasting with the traditional "damsel in distress" stereotype.

RESEARCH METHOD

The primary focus of this study is to support the argument that *Damsel* (2024) disrupts the "damsel in distress" stereotype through analyses of gender roles and social class dynamics. The analysis involves repeated viewings of the film and analyzing

the elements of the story. Subsequently, a body of literature is reviewed to gain an insight into the extent to which the "damsel in distress" trope, perceptions of gender roles, and social hierarchy have been discussed.

The analysis employs approaches drawn from film, feminist, and Weberian theories and alludes to the historical portrayal of stereotypical damsels, a concept traceable to the ancient Greek tale of Andromeda. In this tale, Andromeda is chained, unclothed, to a stone as a sacrifice to a sea monster until Perseus rescues and marries her (Sarkeesian, 2013a, as cited in Trepanier-Jobin & Bonenfant, 2017). According to Smelik (2007), feminism stands as a powerful force that has played a pivotal role in shaping film theory and criticism; feminists perceive cinema as a cultural practice that reflects societal myths surrounding women, femininity, men, and masculinity. In addition, this study uses Max Weber's concept of social stratification to explore the gender roles and social class dynamics of the cinematic depiction of the central characters in *Damsel* (2024). Max Weber's impact on sociology continues to inspire scholars and practitioners across diverse disciplines, such as the sociology of religion, the sociology of law, urban sociology, economic sociology, political sociology, the sociology of social stratification, and literary sociology, offering fresh perspectives and analytical frameworks for understanding contemporary social challenges (Brennan, 2020). Brennan (2020) outlined Max Weber's approach to understanding social stratification, emphasizing the examination of power distribution across societies throughout history. The author then continued by saying that Weber's framework encompasses the analysis of economic, social, and political power dynamics. This perspective extends beyond class distinctions to include status groups and political parties, reflecting Weber's response to the vulgar Marxist discourse in Germany during his time of writing (Brennan, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Correlation between Gender Roles, Social Class, and the "Damsel in Distress" Archetype

Over the last two decades, the representation of women in literature, particularly in films, has undergone a notable transformation. Murphy (2015) stated that analyzing how women are depicted within the framework of recent social gender movements will offer a more profound insight into the perceptions of female characters and the influences

that shape the themes and representations in contemporary cinema.

According to Blackstone (2003), gender roles are shaped by the interactions between individuals and their surroundings, indicating suitable behaviors associated with different genders. The traditional perception of the masculine gender role implies that men are expected to lead their households through financial support and decision-making on family matters. In contrast, the feminine gender role implies that women must commit to full-time domestic responsibilities rather than seeking employment elsewhere (Blackstone, 2003). Alesina, Giuliano, and Nunn (2013) agree with these perceptions, as they mention that "men tended to work outside the home in the fields, while women specialized in activities within the home". The stereotypical portrayal of gender roles is not uncommon in the world of media, especially on television; as Signorielli (1990) argues, women on TV are less aggressive and commonly restricted in their job opportunities than men. Maity (2014) supported this argument by highlighting that the portrayal of women as simplistic, emotional, and confined to domestic roles has been consistently reinforced across diverse media platforms, including films, cartoons, comics, and television shows. Signorielli (1990) also adds that women are often depicted as being more physically appealing, nurturing, and likely to be victimized in the context of romantic interests or family. These perceptions could lead to the depiction of men in literary narratives as the dominant figures, whether fathers or men in general. In *Damsel* (2024), the father figure, Lord Bayford, possesses the power to determine the fate of their family, ignoring the opinions of his wife and daughter, Elodie. Lord Bayford insists on his daughter's compliance with the proposal, believing it is the only way to save his people from poverty; with that consideration in mind, Elodie willingly consents to marry the prince.

At this juncture, Max Weber's framework provides significant insights into gender roles and social class dynamics, particularly regarding social stratification. Based on Weber's framework, social stratification is categorized into three dimensions: economic class, social status, and political power (party) (Dutta, 2015). According to Dutta (2015), these dimensions have their stratification. An individual's income and possessions represent the economic class, the prestige and honor that one enjoys represent the social status, and the exercise of power of an individual represents the political power (Dutta, 2015). Examining the introductory scenes of

Damsel (2024), certain assumptions regarding Elodie's economic class and social status and her family can be inferred. The environment portrayed at the film's onset showcases Elodie's residence in an inhospitable land marked by a scarcity of food supply. Despite living in this impoverished territory, Elodie's family holds the authority within their societal context. However, compared with Aurea, the prosperous land from which Prince Henry originates, it becomes evident that Prince Henry's family possesses a superior status in both economic and social spheres. Considering the social class backgrounds of Elodie, a damsel from a lower class who lives in an unnamed northern land, and the prince, a royal descendant of a place called Aurea, and their correlation with this framework, it is apparent that these classifications combined with the traditional societal norms of gender roles contribute to the "damsel in distress" archetype. Despite the potential narrative development leading to this archetype, the film challenges this assumption.

Challenging the Traditional "Damsel in Distress" Trope

In Western cultural narratives, there is a common theme of the strong protecting the weak or men playing the role of rescuers for women (Solis, 2017). The female protagonists, usually damsels (young women) in classic works from previous centuries, are often depicted to be passive and have to stay quiet, refraining from defending themselves against their oppression (Kehinde, 2022). To mention a more contemporary literary work, according to author Bogarosh (2013), the female character, Mary Jane Watson, in one of the most popular trilogies directed by Sam Raimi spanning 2002 to 2007, *Spider-Man*, is the epitome of the "damsel in distress" stereotype. To provide a brief definition of the idiom, "damsel in distress" means "a young woman who is in trouble and needs a man's help", based on the Cambridge Dictionary. Across the three films, Mary Jane is dramatically rescued by Spider-Man on no less than seven occasions (Bogarosh, 2013).

Maity (2014) stated that during the early to mid-1900s, female Disney cartoon characters were primarily depicted as romantic objects and often portrayed as vulnerable and lacking agency. Throughout the story, these characters' main function is to support the male protagonists, eventually falling in love with their prince charming after being rescued (Maity, 2014). Kehinde (2022) supported these statements by saying that the portrayal of women

being weak and submissive, with a lack of empowerment for them to make their own decisions, along with the depiction of the male characters as capable, dominant, and reliable decision-makers ever prepared to save the distressed princesses are also the stereotypes that early Disney movies consciously promote, nurturing the younger generation, especially young girls in believing that a prince charming will come to their rescue when faced with hardships. Kehinde (2022) further mentioned that this trope is a recurring theme in Disney films such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

In *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), the story unfolds with the classic trope where the male protagonist (the prince) heroically rescues the female lead (Aurora) from her threatening circumstances. The prince's heroic act is depicted by defeating the dragon form of the villainess (Maleficent) and then quickly makes his way to the castle in order to wake Aurora from her deathlike sleep with a true love's kiss, thus restoring her to life and fulfilling the traditional fairy tale narrative. In *Damsel* (2024), however, despite involving an encounter with a fire-breathing dragon, the depiction of the female protagonist contrasts significantly with the tale of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

Elodie, the main female character, finds herself thrust into a precarious situation when she is arranged to marry a prince from the royal family by her father. The marriage is presented as a solution to help her impoverished people, highlighting the social and economic pressures that shape Elodie's circumstances. After the wedding ceremony, Elodie and the prince participate in an ancient ritual; the story then unfolds with Elodie thrown into the chasm, the dragon's lair to be exact, realizing that she is the actual sacrifice. In the context of the conventional "damsel in distress" archetype, the story typically progresses with the female protagonist waiting for the prince to show up and save her. However, the film challenges this expectation by portraying Elodie as a courageous survivor who orchestrates her escape.

In her quest for survival, Elodie navigates through the cave, stumbling upon remnants of the princess' crowns and clothing, which are not hers. It becomes apparent that she is not the first princess to fall victim to the dragon. The previous princesses contribute to Elodie's attempt to escape by providing the map of the dragon's lair on the wall. By defying the traditional trope once again, this scene showcases aspects of womanhood that resonate with feminism, which has significantly influenced film theory and

critique (Smelik, 2007). Womanhood in literature also correlates with Western historical aspects, as Underwood (1985) mentioned. Underwood (1985) stated that imaginative and skilled writers are able to depict women within their historical context, drawing upon the empowering narratives and mythologies that have shaped their experiences. Throughout history, women have forged bonds with one another to navigate and transform the harsh realities of their environments, particularly in the fierce era of the industrial revolution (Underwood, 1985).

Not only are these bonds a response to historical conditions but they are also backed by their roles within religious communities (Underwood, 1985). Underwood (1985) further explained that as women migrated to the frontier, they brought with them a rich parcel of images, communal ties, and spiritual resilience, which empowered them to enact change in diverse ways and amidst various challenges. Moving on to the cinematic aspects, according to Smelik (2007), the crucial theoretical evolution lies in the transition from regarding cinema as a mirror reflecting reality to acknowledging its role in constructing a distinct ideological portrayal of reality. Characterized by its oversight, classic cinema effectively conceals the ideological framework underlying its narratives. As a result, classic film narratives can present depictions of women that are meticulously constructed yet appear inherently natural, authentic, and appealing to the audience (Smelik, 2007). The author stated that this phenomenon is commonly referred to as the illusionism of classic cinema, wherein the constructed images portrayed on screen are perceived as genuine and faithful representations of reality. She further explained that this theoretical shift underscores the idea that cinematic narratives are not neutral reflections of the world but deliberate constructions designed to convey specific ideologies and worldviews. By obscuring the mechanisms of production, classic cinema perpetuates the illusion that the images presented are refined reflections of reality, thus reinforcing societal norms and values regarding gender roles and identities.

Moreover, Smelik (2007) mentioned that this perspective invites critical examination of the ways in which cinema influences and shapes cultural perceptions and expectations. By recognizing cinema as an active agent in the construction of reality rather than its passive reflection, scholars and audiences alike are prompted to interrogate the underlying ideologies embedded within cinematic representations of gender, thereby fostering a deeper

understanding of the complex relationship between cinema, ideology, and society. Traditionally, sociologists have predominantly regarded literature as a vehicle for enhanced comprehension of reality, delving into the intricacies of character psychology, motivations, and the social environment they inhabit, as Longo (2016) stated. The author further explained that there is a general notion that literary geniuses possess a unique capacity to unveil profound interconnections among events, psychological impulses, and human behavior, often surpassing the capabilities of sociological analyses. Literature is acknowledged for its ability to capture different eras, depict diverse social contexts, or forecast societal shifts. However, Longo continued by saying that for sociologists, literature may lack the requisite specificity characteristic of empirical data owing to its fictional nature and absence of a direct link to real-world phenomena. Returning to Smelik (2007), she stated that, in essence, the theoretical transition from viewing cinema as reflective to recognizing its role in constructing ideological narratives offers valuable insights into the sophisticated dynamics of representation and power within the realm of film discourse.

Adding to the theoretical shift in film narratives, McDonough (2017) stated that in the narratives of fairy tales and stories aimed at young audiences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there has been a noticeable shift towards empowering female characters and granting them agency. This transformation in character portrayal mirrors broader societal changes and resonates with feminist movements, reflecting evolving perspectives in popular culture. The author further explains that a significant aspect of this evolution is the portrayal of modern female characters as proactive agents who take control of their destinies, departing from the traditional roles of passivity. These characters are no longer restricted to the role of damsels in distress awaiting rescue; instead, they actively engage with challenges and drive the narrative forward with their actions. This trend reflects a cultural recognition of the multifaceted nature of women's roles and the importance of portraying them as competent, independent individuals capable of navigating their own paths. Through these narratives, contemporary storytelling serves as a reflection of, and a catalyst for, changing attitudes toward gender roles and female empowerment in society.

Utilizing the feminist concept of agency, McDonough (2017) defines agency as "the ability to make choices and follow through with corresponding

actions." To provide several examples, the author mentions female characters from the *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games* series that demonstrate female agency: Hermione Granger, Professor McGonagall, and Katniss Everdeen. Another perfect example of the emergence of female agency in a "damsel in distress" archetypal narrative can be found in the *Shrek* series, where the central female character, Princess Fiona, initially has to be rescued from the highest room of the tallest tower, take a positive turn when she and other princesses united to overthrow the kingdom. According to D'Souza (2020), Princess Fiona emerges as a character of remarkable bravery, intelligence, and resilience, possessing the strength to confront and overcome adversity rather than resigning herself to passivity and dependency. Her boldness shines through as she faces daunting obstacles with determination and resourcefulness, refusing to be subdued by the trials that beset her. Not content to sit idly by, Fiona takes charge of her destiny, displaying insightful decision-making abilities that allow her to navigate the complexities of her life with grace and confidence. Moreover, the author further mentioned that Princess Fiona's excellence extends beyond mere survival; she thrives in the face of adversity, seizing opportunities for growth and self-empowerment. In her relationship with Shrek, Fiona exemplifies a partnership built on mutual respect, understanding, and affection, contributing to a harmonious and fulfilling union that is a testament to her strength of character and depth of wisdom.

Circling back to *Damsel* (2024), as the story draws to a close, Elodie chooses not to take the dragon's life and, instead, reveals the truth about the royals' manipulation while showing compassion towards the creature, demonstrating her agency in making a virtuous choice. This decision works in her favor as the dragon believes her and ultimately joins her side. Elodie successfully escapes the cave and rushes towards the royals' castle. Another wedding ceremony of the prince and another damsel from a lower class, just like Elodie, is being held by the time she arrives. To make a change and rescue the soon-to-be-sacrificed Damsel, Elodie is willing to stand up against injustice and suggests that the damsel and all her family exit the castle and save themselves. After the innocent people have left the castle, the mother dragon appears and takes her revenge for all of the wrongs that the royals have done to her and the other sacrificed damsels by burning them to the ground, the prince is no exception. The film's conclusion highlights

empowered and self-reliant female representation by choosing not to provide a redemption arc for the prince who has tricked and betrayed Elodie.

Although there have been earlier films with the same title, such as *Damsel* (2015) and *Damsel* (2018) and *Damsel* (2024) are likely to adhere more closely to the expectations of the classic "damsel in distress" trope due to its more traditional period-piece setting. To briefly explain the two previous films, *Damsel* (2015) is a coming-of-age story that follows a resilient young girl as she flees from her self-obsessed father, finding solace and companionship in New England's vast and vibrant forests. Forming an unlikely bond with an older man who harbors his own fears, she discovers genuine affection for the first time. Their quest to recover his deceased wife's necklace leads them into a perilous situation when they become targets of a menacing stranger lurking in the woods. As for *Damsel* (2018), the film is also a period piece set in the year 1870, to be exact; it tells the story of a wealthy settler as he sets out on a journey across the American frontier to marry the love of his life. Along the way, what initially seemed like a straightforward expedition becomes increasingly dangerous, blurring the lines between villain, hero, and Damsel. However, again, despite the possible narrative development of *Damsel* (2024) leaning towards the stereotypical portrayal of a distressed damsel, the film takes an alternative approach, as mentioned previously.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the nuanced connection among gender roles, social class dynamics, and the representation of female agency in storytelling, specifically within the sphere of the "damsel in distress" trope. Notwithstanding the typical connotation of the term "damsel" with "damsel in distress", there is a shift in contemporary literary pieces towards illustrating female characters, particularly damsels, as more independent and empowered individuals. By exploring the theoretical framework of feminism, feminist film theory, female agency, and the social stratification concept of Max Weber, Elodie defies the stereotype of a helpless damsel waiting for rescue and instead presents herself as a damsel who disrupts and redefines the traditional notions of female agency and empowerment. *Damsel* is not a story about a happily ever after romance narrative; it showcases the importance of female agency for survival and thriving in the face of extreme danger. This depiction serves as a potent narrative tool, offering invaluable

guidance to the younger generation, particularly young women, on navigating their paths with agency and empowerment. By witnessing female characters take charge of their own destinies, free from the constraints of dependency on male figures, impressionable minds are exposed to alternative perspectives on gender roles and personal agency. Through these depictions, emerging generations gather insights into the diverse pathways for women to assert themselves, pursue their aspirations, and shape their futures on their own terms. Such narratives challenge traditional norms and inspire individuals to cultivate a sense of self-reliance and resilience, fostering a more inclusive and decent society where individuals of all genders can thrive. Thus, by portraying women as agents of their narratives, media representations contribute to reshaping societal perceptions and nursing a culture of empowerment and self-determination among young women and beyond.

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