

From Innocence to Chaos: Unravelling Jung's Persona, Shadow, and Identity Fragmentation in Cruella Movie (2021)

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*"Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?
My brothers and sisters, this should not be."*

James 3:11–12 (NIV)

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this research is to uncover the themes in the story to make it more relatable and comprehensible, and for readers to understand the importance of knowing psychological issues in movies. This study aims to explore the 2021 Disney movie *Cruella* (2021) through the perspective of Jung's and persona theory, to excavate the issues of the themes: identity fragmentation, emotional suppression, and psychological conflict represented in the movie. With the Jungian psychological point of view from the book *"Researches into the phenomenology of the self"* by Carl Jung in 1951, this analysis was finalized. By using a qualitative close reading method, data was collected through the repeated viewing of the scenes and dialogues, and deep observation of the present themes, cinematography, and color symbolism, plot and storyline study based on Jungian psychological concepts. Therefore, the findings show: 1) The transformation from Estella to Cruella represents her unleashing the shadow side, and suppressed emotions she had; anger, rebellion, frustration. 2) The movie's switch in color palette and cinematography visually shows the shift in Estella's personality, the struggles with her fragmented identity, emotional exhaustion, and internal struggle. 3) Estella was both the ego-personality and mask for the public, whilst Cruella represents her buildup of unleashed "bad" emotions. The primary objective of this research is to reveal themes present in the narrative while making them comprehensible for readers to fully grasp and know the importance of understanding social and mental health issues.

Keywords: *Jungian, psychology, identity fragmentation, shadow, persona*

INTRODUCTION

Literature reflects human life, including its experiences, emotions, values, imagination, and beliefs while shaping the way individuals observe the world and themselves. The function of literature is beyond recreation, it has become the dominant source of empathy, critical thinking, imagination, and growth in society which makes a strong impact on the world and human life. This impact is officially attributed to children's literature, where stories and writings encourage children to imagine themselves in the character's position. Through this process, children eventually shape their identity, emotional development, and important values such as kindness, courage, and strength as they grow (Lin et al., 2025; Rimm-Kaufman, 2026). By analyzing a

movie through literature, it helps us to understand the messages and support ideas in a journal study.

On August 10, 2022, an article titled “*Jennette McCurdy Once Needed Her Mom to Be an “Angel” as an Abuse Coping Mechanism. No Longer.*” was published in “*Teen Vogue*” by Max Gao. In their conversation (Max and McCurdy), McCurdy revealed how her seemingly happy and joyous onscreen persona masked the suffering she experienced from how her mother, Debra, physically and emotionally abused her. For context, when McCurdy was a teenager, she became the shining star of Nickelodeon; she played on the teen sitcom *iCarly* and *Sam & Cat* as the character Sam Puckett. Her identity was largely shaped and controlled by her abusive mother; how she was forced into acting, influenced into resisting calories to delay puberty, and to the point her behavior was dictated. It left McCurdy detached from her true self and struggles later in life with eating disorders and addiction to alcohol. McCurdy was able to separate herself from the other version of her that was constructed for others, and rebuilt her identity, through countless years of therapy. She was over-identified with the persona of a child star created by her mother, so much so that her genuine self was pushed down. In resemblance to the shadow theory by Carl Jung, this shows when a person is identified with a different persona, their authentic self will be suppressed and forced not to show. The healing process McCurdy went through represents the attempt to heal and regain the hidden parts of herself, rather than continuing life with a false identity.

Cruella is a movie published by Disney, on April 13, 2021. With a combination of crime comedy-drama, action, and a touch of violence, parents and kids stated that this movie is rated for kids ages 13 and up (Common sense media). This movie was nominated in 43 awards and won 28 awards in total. Such as: People’s Choice Awards for The Drama Movie of 2021, an Oscar for Best Costume Design, World Soundtrack Awards for Best Original Song Written for a Film, International Film Music Critics Award (IFMCA) for Best Original Score for a Comedy Film, and numerous others.

The story of a young and gifted girl named Estella, who lived with a passion for designing fashion at a young age. She meets two thieves who match her hunger for an appetite of mischief. Together, the three form a life of their own in the streets of London. The determination to make her name known in the fashion industry grew larger as she grew older. Though, Estella constantly faces challenges due to her suppressed rebellious behavior. She managed to get a job as a seamstress for the baroness. As she dived deeper into the difficult, demanding, and competitive fashion world, the tension between her suppressed personality and her outer persona became increasingly apparent. This draws her alter ego, a wicked side of her who is cruel, bold, and vengeful. An alter ego who she calls: *Cruella*. Estella uses Cruella to outstand the Baroness’s

spotlight with her bold fashion, which brings the two, Cruella and the Baroness into a heated competition.

The story reflects during Estella's youth, she challenges herself to be a good person as her mother told her to be. But society showed through her school that they do not accept her for who she is because she's considered "*different*". In reality, society expects highly towards people to have the same morals as everyone else who adapted to the current morals in their generation. When it comes to individualists, society becomes intrusive about who they are and could lead to mistreating them as "anomalies" among the community. This is because of the old morals that still live generationally. To those who are truly living as their own person, they tend to face the narcissism of the type of society they are put through, which leads these individualists to hide their true identity in exchange for an exception that reflects society's norms. People, mostly teenagers, are likely to struggle figuring out who they are while being under pressure from society's expectations.

The *Jungian Analytical Psychological* theory, as explained in *Aion* by Carl Gustav Jung, explains the structure of human consciousness and the subconscious elements which influences personality and human behavior. This theory points out the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious mind, especially through the ideas of *Persona and the Shadow*. In *Aion*, Jung demonstrates that the Shadow represents the hidden, repressed, or even darker sides of a person who are often rejected by society or by oneself. These unconscious characteristics can suddenly appear in a moment of conflict, emotional problems, or identity crisis. Jungian analytical theory can be relevant to the analysis of the movie *Cruella* because the movie depicts the psychological conflict between two personalities Estella and Cruella, and shows how a person struggles between social identity and repressed desires. Through this theory, this movie can be comprehended as a process of finding one's identity and the integration of conflicting aspects of personality into a complete sense of self.

Previous research on Craig Gillespie's *Cruella* (2021) has widely applied in Jungian analytical psychology to outline the protagonist's journey. Fatihah and Mustofa (2020) made use of a descriptive quantitative method to examine Estella's *Persona* of changes in collaboration into the *Shadow* of Cruella, eventually achieving self realization by identifying her intrinsic value. In the same way, Nursidik and Mustofa (2021) aimed more on the Archetypes of the *Persona* and *Shadow*, identifying that Estella's mental growth is triggered by the trauma of her mother's death, leading to a combination of her dark, ambitious, and revenge side. While these studies have successfully identified the presence of Jungian main ideas and the binary shift between the "nice" Estella and the "evil" Cruella, they mostly handle the Collective Unconscious as a stable

background or reduce their scale to the individual's internal conflict for self identity within no social interaction.

Therefore, the significant difference that has yet to be explored is psychological fragmentation that is caused by incomplete identity, especially observing the separation itself rather than the combination. Meanwhile, the current research observes Cruella as a balanced self realization, our research analyzes "shadow" instead of a personality trait, it is a dominant force that has broken them apart, which leaves them with a broken identity. This research uses a Jungian perspective to explore how the trauma of the Baroness's betrayal builds psychological fragmentation, in which "persona" is not combined but rather destroyed by the "shadow", followed by slight differences of identity fragmentation that is generally overlooked in current literature, which tends to focus on the self personal realization stories.

Through the story, the Jungian Analytical Psychology theory is represented in parts of the storyline. Carl Jung explains about the mask and the shadow, Estella's "mother" persuades her to be a good daughter her mother expects, meaning she has to hide her true identity in order to please her mother and to fit in society. As Carl Jung mentioned: the shadow becomes a monster, he believed that if you hide yourself for too long, it becomes "demonic" or "angry", which is why Cruella was cruel and maddening once she is out of the box.

As the result of the issue above, this research dives into the psychological fragmentation between the social mask (persona) and the hidden parts of psyche (shadow), and how this movie represents the psychological fragmentation in Jungian's theory. From this research, we identify how the Baroness's complete power and the intense social pressure of the fashion world forces Estella into a state of psychological fragmentation, where she must carry on an obedient persona to survive while reducing her true creativity into a hidden "shadow". Other than that, the purpose of this research is to analyze "Cruella" through its plot, visual graphics, and the storyline through the perspective of inequality in the imbalance power of her environment and the issue that aligns in psychoanalysis. Eventually, this research helps readers to understand how movies use cinematography and narrative to portray real psychological struggles, functioning as a bridge between the cinematic visual design with the harsh truth of Carl Jung's *Aion*. By analyzing *Cruella*, this research shows a hidden reality that readers often dismiss, that the socially recognized "persona" is only a brief defense, and beneath the extreme inequality in power, our hidden "shadow" suddenly takes control, forcing the original identity to transform aggressively just to stay alive.

Therefore in conclusion, this study helps literary psychoanalysis by looking deeper at psychological issues instead of just simple identifications. It shows how strong trauma can hurt one's true self. This research focuses on how mental breakdown happens due to heavy pressure,

especially in this movie Cruella, the trauma from The Baroness and the constant judgementality of society for being “different”. This work looks at how a person’s self can split apart. Like in this movie, seeing Cruella as a wicked force that slowly breaks down Estella’s identity causes inner conflict instead of just being a personality trait. By studying Cruella’s story and mentality, including visuals, camera works, and dialogue, this research helps readers to understand psychological breakdown and identity issues, which are often oversimplified in stories about personal growth.

The key binary oppositions described below aims to compare various concepts contained in this movie in order to help us understand this issue thoroughly:

Persona (The Mask)	Shadow (The Unrepressed)
In Cruella, Estella highlights the Persona, the socially developed identity built by the need for acknowledgement and conformity, as explained in <i>Aion: Researches Into The Phenomenology of The Self</i> . She controls her opposing and instinctive traits so as to purpose within society, demonstrating herself as controlled and “good”. Jung highlights this as “ <i>The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society... a kind of mask</i> ” (Aion, 1951, p.94), presenting that Estella’s identity is not genuine rather than authentic. This unbalanced identification with the Persona develops inner tension, as “ <i>the more one-sided the conscious attitude is, the more intense becomes the opposition from the unconscious</i> ” (Aion, 1951, p.98) causing imbalance and the fragmentation of her identity.	In contrast, Cruella reflects the Shadow, the controlled and darker aspects of Estella's inner self that seek expression, power, and individuality. She signifies everything Estella denies: chaos, ambition, and resistance of social rules. Jung describes the shadow as “ <i>a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality...[requiring] recognition of the dark aspects of the personality as present and real</i> ” (Aion, 1951, p.8-10). Yet, instead of combining these elements into an inner balance, Estella is replaced by them, allowing the Shadow to control her identity. Whereas Jung argues that “ <i>the integration of the shadow is the first stage in the process of individuation</i> ” (Aion, 1951, p.20), Cruella eventually expresses a failure of this process, as the shift from Persona to Shadow results in identity fragmentation rather than an integrated self.

METHOD

This research of the movie Cruella used a qualitative close reading method to examine psychological issues, especially identity, duality and the development of self. The analysis was based on Carl Jung’s analytical insights, especially his ideas regarding the Shadow and self development as explained in *Aion: Researches Into The Phenomenology Of The Self* (1951). Close reading was used to identify the dialogue, topic, scenes (*cinematography*) and the character doings in detail to recognize the connection between (*the persona*) her kind side and (*the shadow*) her negative side.

Each scene was examined in detail by selecting scenes that represent the conflict between the *persona* and the *shadow*. Especially the scene where Estella’s identity begins to shatter

slowly. By focusing on cinematography of the dialogues, symbolisms, and settings, a deep study that explained deeper meanings about individuation and the merging of the shadow was able to be conducted. This theory examined the individual's journey toward the Self, in which the internal hierarchy was shaped by the ego's relationship with inner thoughts structures. Using close reading allowed the study to uncover parts of explanations within the movie. Demonstrating its narration and visual elements, it represented Carl Jung's concepts such as psychological fragmentation and the struggle with the shadow.

DISCUSSION

In Cruella, the opposition between Estella and Cruella demonstrates the issue of identity fragmentation, which can be interpreted through Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self. Jung interprets that every individual procedures a "shadow," the hidden side of the personality that comprises desires, emotions, and traits often refused by society or by self. In Cruella, Estella lives as a kind, obedient and socially acceptable person, while Cruella is depicted as the darker, rebellious, and more aggressive side of her identity. As Estella encounters trauma, rejection, and pressure from the people around her, the border between her two identities becomes gradually unstable. This fragmentation mirrors Jung's idea in Aion that when the shadow is controlled for too long, it eventually appears with greater force and begins to dominate the conscious self. Instead of achieving psychological balance, Estella struggles among the persona she reflects to society and the shadow she tries to hide, causing an internal conflict that forms her transformation into Cruella.

At the beginning of the movie, Estella's mother asks "Hey, what do you say to Cruella when she tries to fool you?" (00:01:39). The question highlights that "Cruella" is not only a nickname, however a separate identity that happens within Estella herself. Her mother's point out that Cruella represents the darker and more oppositional side of Estella's personality that must



persistently be controlled and suppressed. This relates with Carl Jung's theory in Aion, where Jung argues that the shadow includes the hidden attitude and desires refused by the conscious self. Jung quoted, "*The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself*" (Jung, 1951, p.284). In Estella's terms of situation,

Cruella indicates more of the anger, rebellion, confidence and aggression that society reflects on as unacceptable. Her mother pursues to separate Estella from these traits by considering Cruella as something dangerous that must not take control. Jung also claims that controlling the shadow does not eliminate it, but rather strengthens its influence over the individual. This is revealed in

Estella's growing inability to identify between her true self and the Cruella persona as the movie progresses.

As Estella has recently lost her mother during an accident at the Baroness's party, She has nowhere to go and ends up sleeping in the streets. It is not long until she finds two street thieves, Jasper and Horace. After Estella realizes both of the thieves seem to have no family, she follows



them to an abandoned house where she begins living with them in London. With no guidance, Estella also starts stealing and doing crime along with them to survive. At the abandon house which she now calls her home (00:15:10), Estella is sitting in a dimly lit room with a hand on top of her head. Her expression seems very serious

and distant, showing her inner conflict. After all she has been through, Estella thinks back to the times her mother always says to Estella to behave properly and hide the chaotic traits that made her different from others. Estella decides to change her appearance from her natural hair color to red, symbolizing her attempt to suppress her true identity and appear "normal" to society and to get accepted. The dark color creates a melancholic atmosphere that reflects her loneliness after losing her mother. Estella says *"Granted, being a thief is not exactly a mother's dream"* followed by *"But she's gone"*, Estella feels less responsible for maintaining the "good" identity, which is why this moment becomes an important turning point. Carl Jung even states *"The persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is."* (Jung, 1969, P. 122) explains that to be accepted to society, people must make a social mask to fit in. According to Jung's statement, this mask is like a persona that people wear to the public to hide parts of their true personality. In the end it makes them suppress their emotions, desires, and their true identity. Exactly how Estella starts to hide her true identity by changing her natural black and white hair by dyeing it red, symbolizing her attempt to be seen as "normal".



The following scene, *"But I like to say that normal is the cruelest insult of them all"* (00:35:00), acts as a powerful psychological trigger, which reveals Estella's personal struggle to escape from the "boring" mask she wears for society. In this scene, the "normal" world is shown through dull colors and balanced camera shots that represents a situation of psychological stuckness. In his book *Aion*, Carl Jung explains this as a person being *"increasingly deprived of the moral decision as to how he should live his own life, and instead is ruled, fed, clothed, and educated... in accordance with the standards that give pleasure and satisfaction to the masses"* (Jung, 1970, p. 250). By referring to "normal" as an insult, the "persona" highlights the hidden damage in trying to fit in, which puts pressure on Estella to hide her true identity just to stay organized. This dialogue

confirms Estella drift away from what people expect of her, showing that her “unique style” is not just for show, but it is her Cruella side (the “shadow”) wanting to be seen. The camera moves smoothly and steadily, showing the strict social rules she is criticizing, the dialogue transforms these rules as a cage. As Jung quoted “*no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort*” and “*recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real*” is the only option to become a truly whole identity (Jung, 1951, p. 8). Eventually, our analysis shows that Estella’s rejection of being “normal” is a required development, the chaotic energy of Cruella is destined to break the stuckness, while the fake side of Estella uses it to find freedom.

Estella continues to try to behave according to society, even dying her natural hair to fit in and to appear more “normal”. However, as time passes, Estella discovers the truth that the Baroness was actually her biological mother and realizes that she’s actually responsible for Catherine’s death. Estella experienced feelings of betrayal, anger, and emotional pain, Estella gradually stopped repressing herself and her true identity. These experiences led her to create the Cruella identity as a form of self-expression and empowerment. Cruella to the baroness goes to the party, as she was already working for them as a fashion designer before discovering the truth. As part of her plan to publicly challenge and humiliate the Baroness. As Cruella enters the party, she says “*Do you have a light?*” The line reflects her confidence, and her boldness. By wearing a bold red dress and standing confidently which draws the attention of others (00:50:05).

The red dress symbolizes power, rebellion, and danger, reflecting the now new darker and more fearless identity. Everyone around her wears neutral colors such as white and black, it makes Cruella stand out and reinforces her attempt at separating herself from societal norms. The lighting now in



the scene is brighter and more dramatic in contrast to earlier scenes with Estella that often is in dim lighting and muted tones to symbolize sadness, the stronger light represents how now she is expressing herself rather than hiding her true identity. Which is why this scene is important because it shows Cruella no longer trying to fit into society like Estella once did. This exact scene relates to Carl Jung's statement “*One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.*” (Jung, 1969, p. 265). He explains how people cannot fully understand themselves if they only focus on their positive qualities. From actually recognizing and accepting those darker parts of yourself, such as your personality being filled with anger, rebellion, fear, or hidden desires. By confronting your darker part of yourself, Jung believes that when personal growth can finally happen. This fits the scene on how Cruella is more confident now because she is no longer hiding her true self.

With a heavy heart and pent up emotion in oneself, Cruella drives to a fountain on a

stolen motorcycle. Cruella at the end finally realizes that no matter how hard she tries to be Estella, all the effort goes down the drain: “But the thing is, I’m not sweet Estella. Try as I might. I never was. I’m Cruella. Born brilliant, born bad, and a little bit mad.” (1:36:22) She stopped rejecting her shadow and placed the mask to rest.



Jung quoted, *"The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality... To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge."* (Jung, 1951, P.8) Estella acts as the persona: something made to play a part in front of other people. Someone kind, caring, and sweet. Equivalent to a mask. Whilst Cruella presents as the shadow: a “dark side” that was shoved down and never meant to come out. Just another personality to be ignored and deemed evil or wicked. As it takes courage to admit and recognize the “dark side” of one’s self, therefore Jung calls it a moral problem. Hence, the dilemma Cruella faces in the past is between accepting or further suppressing her “other side”. The shadow acted as a storage bin or a mere trash can for everything Estella rejected as *her* personality. Cruella challenges her ego-personality (choosing how she wants to be seen), by both acknowledging and accepting that she is born as Cruella; not Estella. Cruella simply “knows” who she is, but by recognizing the “other personality”, she *acknowledges* who she truly is.

A dominant cool-blue temperature is present with a heavily desaturated color palette. Muted colors such as light gray and pale blue are seen dominating the entire shot. The palette drives away from using any previous bright colors and high contrast whites. Hence, creating a visual of what Cruella is experiencing: emotional and physical exhaustion. To create a scene such as this, where it focuses solely on Cruella and blurs the background; the technique used is called “soft bokeh”. It shows how she currently isolates herself from her surroundings. Deafening the outside world to talk to her once mother. The blurry shapes of the world behind her makes the audience solely focus on her internal state, her emotions; and not on the external values. The lighting used is dim, barely present. Only soft glows of yellow light from the street lamp and the building in the background. Even so, Cruella’s face is barely visible. This subtly forces the audience to pause—and shift their whole focus on her.

In the end, Cruella's desire for revenge against The Baroness has been fulfilled. Further after the event and tragedy, Estella’s funeral is set near The Baroness's Estate, where at last, is where Cruella's speech ends with her parting words to Estella: “Goodbye, Estella. She was with



her mother now. I'll take it from here. But Cruella was alive." (2:02:10) For most of her life, Estella was nothing more than a mask she wore to fit in society in order to survive and to please her adoptive mother, which in theory, makes her the persona, the appearance that people show to be accepted by others. Jung warned that confusing the mask with who you really are can be harmful, as he quoted:

"A man cannot get rid of himself in favour of an artificial personality without punishment. Even the attempt to do so brings about, in all ordinary cases, unconscious reactions in the form of bad moods, affects, phobias, obsessive ideas, backsliding vices, etc. The social 'strong man' is in his private life often a mere child where his own states of feeling are concerned..." (Jung, 1928, P.307)

Jung argues that the human mind demands balance. Everything that is suppressed will eventually come out as anxiety, emotional outburst, or a total breakdown. Before her funeral, as the "Estella" persona begins to crack under the pressure of dealing with the Baroness and her process of learning the truth, she undergoes a massive behavioral shift. She becomes cold, demanding, and volatile with Jasper and Horace. In Jungian terms, because she tries to "get rid of herself", her repressed nature as Cruella begins leaking out as uncontrollable, emotional outbursts. She is not just being mean; her unconscious mind is staging a violent coup because it is tired of being suffocated under suppression. As Jung's quote mentioned, "backsliding vice", this word perfectly describes her absolute addiction to reckless, chaotic creativity and rule-breaking. Knowing Estella is a lie, and the "punishment" Jung speaks of is the psychological agony of trying to maintain that lie. Looking back to the following scene, she held a funeral for Estella as a way to consciously let go of her social mask to free herself as Cruella.

CONCLUSION

Cruella (2021) is a movie that shows the struggles of psychological fragmentation that Jung describes. With Estella as the social mask (*persona*) who strives endlessly to have the perfect image for the public, and Cruella as the suppressed parts of psyche (*shadow*) who become a landfill to store what Estella puts aside. Through a scene where Cruella admits she can never be Estella, and how she accepts her dark side (Cruella), the movie unmask themes of acknowledging oneself through recognizing the "other personality", demonstrating Jung's belief about the awakening of the shadow and how self-knowledge requires accepting the shadow. Albeit the movie's shift in color palette and cinematography serves as an aesthetic change, it too serves as the visual for Estella's personality transition, her internal struggles caused by her fragmented identity, and emotional exhaustion. The research also reveals how throughout the story, Estella functions as the ego-personality and the obedient mask demanded by society. Contrasting her, Cruella, represents the buildup of unleashed "bad" emotions. The two

personalities mirror Jung's idea of psychological compensation: the more someone solely focuses on one personality, the unconscious persona becomes stronger and begins to fight back. In short, this research shows how a movie can represent real psychological issues whilst making them comprehensible for various audiences. Future studies could apply the Jungian theory to other related movies (anti-hero, thrillers) to analyze if the identity fragmentation trope follows a consistent pattern or if it's often used in Hollywood. As well as investigate deeply into how specific lighting choice, color palette, and camera techniques act as tools to visualize internal feelings or to support a scene.

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