

**DAMSEL- DECONSTRUCTING THE QUEST: GENDER
ROLES AND HEROISM IN THE FILM AND NOVEL
ADAPTATION¹**

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Abstract

This paper examines the deconstruction of traditional quest narratives and heroic archetypes in *Damsel*, analysing both the film and its novel adaptation through the lens of feminist and deconstructive literary theory. Furthermore, the analysis reveals how *Damsel* undermines the binary oppositions in classical heroic tales, particularly those between hero and victim, masculine and feminine, or active and passive. By presenting a protagonist who initially appears to conform to the 'damsel in distress' archetype, the narrative gradually examines genre expectations, repositioning the female character as a figure of subversive agency. While the film introduces visual empowerment through action and survival, the novel displays psychological depth, internal conflict, and expanded world-building. By comparing the two

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forms of art, the paper argues that the novelization enhances feminist storytelling by reclaiming Elodie's voice and providing critical introspection absent in the cinematic portrayal. Ultimately, *Damsel* not only reimagines the traditional framework of the quest narrative but also challenges the normative ideologies that inform conventional heroic archetypes, inviting a rethinking of narrative authority and gender representation.

Keywords: adaptation; agency; heroic archetypes; gender roles.

Introduction

The paper examines how the film vs. novel *Damsel* subverts traditional fairy tale tropes to present a powerful narrative of female agency, survival, and transformation. Based on a screenplay by Dan Mazeau, this work represents an innovative and collaborative storytelling project between New York Times bestselling author Evelyn Skye and the creative team responsible for the 2024 Netflix film *Damsel*, directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, featuring Millie Bobby Brown in the lead role. The writer had access to the draft screenplay and drew inspiration from it for the novel, while Netflix's filmmaking team incorporated elements from the book into the film whenever they felt it would enhance that form of storytelling. While the core narrative of the film and book remains consistent, Skye was granted creative freedom to reinterpret the story, offering readers a distinct experience from the film. The additional details she introduced in the book were later used to enrich the characters and the world in the film adaptation.

As Evelyn Skye notes in an interview, although both the novel and film share the same origin, they remain "unique works of art" (Perez, 18 octombrie 2022).

Adaptation Theory Framework

The adaptation is a composite of textual and filmic signs merging in audience consciousness together with other cultural narratives and often leads to confusion as to which is novel and which is film. [...] What one discovers is that

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many so-called 'unfaithful' adaptations are operating under a de(re)composing model. They are condemned as unfaithful because critics read only one way - from novel to film - and find that the film has made changes. But if one reads in both directions - from novel to film and then from film back to novel - one often finds the alleged infidelities clearly in the text. These 'infidelities' represent rejections of certain parts of the novel in favor of others, not total departures from the novel (Eliot 2003, p. 157).

George Bluestone, a pioneer in the study of film adaptations of literature, argues that filmmakers are independent creators who craft their own work rather than simply translating the original writer's material (Constanzo, 1992). According to the author, adaptation acts as a form of raw material that conveys thematic content. Key characters, significant events, and major themes serve as the foundational elements of the film. He emphasizes that a film adaptation, instead of being a transitional phase between mediums, has a distinct artistic identity. This idea is illustrated with the image of 'two intersecting lines', where novels and films meet at a single point before diverging; therefore, "what is peculiarly filmic and what is peculiarly novelistic cannot be converted without destroying an integral part of each" (Constanzo, 1992, 20).

Rather than striving for strict fidelity to the source text, McFarlane (1996) argues that an adaptation should 'play around' with it, aiming to evoke rather than replicate the original work. The key challenge lies in conveying the essence of the text, such as its plot, characters, and major development, while implementing necessary modifications and transpositions to move beyond illustration.

The insistence on fidelity has led to a suppression of potentially more rewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptation. It tends to ignore the idea of adaptation as an example of convergence among the arts, perhaps a desirable - even inevitable - process in a rich culture; it fails to take into serious account what may be transferred from novel to film as distinct from what will

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require more complex processes of adaptation; and it marginalizes those production determinants which have nothing to do with the novel but may be powerfully influential upon the film (McFarlane 1996, p. 10).

McFarlane's central theoretical contribution is his distinction between elements that can be directly transferred from text to screen and those that require adaptation. He identifies plot, setting, and character as transferable, while aspects connected to medium-specific signifiers, such as enunciation, style, and the transformation of space into time, require adaptation. For example, McFarlane cites the use of subjective camera or voice-over as equivalents to first-person narration. However, this approach overlooks important narratological distinctions, particularly between focalisation and narration, or between mode and voice. In the context of fidelity, literature and film are not considered equal; texts are judged by different standards and often to a lesser degree than other art forms, especially film. Only adaptations are seen as capable of being 'unfaithful' to the original text. Elements such as new characters, key events, added scenes, and thematic interpretations become crucial in providing authenticity to the film (Stam 2000).

In *Concepts in Film Theory* (1984), Dudley Andrew outlines three primary ways in which a film can relate to its source text: 'borrowing', 'intersecting', or 'transforming'. 'Borrowing' involves directly taking elements from the original work; 'intersecting' corresponds to what McFarlane describes as transferring, and 'transforming' refers to a more substantial adaptation, which Andrew considers to be adaptation proper.

Kamilla Elliott's study *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (2003) focuses on the idea that "novel and film studies are particularly hospitable to a critique of theory from practice, since there is often no clear demarcation between theorists, critics, novelists, filmmakers, reviewers and reader-viewers" (Eliot 2003, p. 6). In Elliot's view, one can notice six types of adaptation, an approach that better aligns with the overall theory of film adaptation by emphasizing theorizing from films rather than

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narrowly defining each one, shifting from practical application to theoretical discussion, as follows: 'the psychic concept of adaptation' preserving the essence of the text; 'the ventriloquist concept of adaptation' that "blatantly empties out the novel's signs and fills them with filmic spirits. [...] The adaptation, like a ventriloquist, props up the dead novel, throwing its voice onto the silent corpse" (Elliott 2003, p. 143); 'the genetic concept of adaptation' applying narratological tools to examine the connections between text and film; 'the de(re)composing concept of adaptation'; 'the incarnational concept of adaptation' highlighting the longstanding belief that cinema is the most realistic art form and 'the trumping concept of adaptation' as films appear to pay tribute to the novels they adapt.

According to Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013), adaptations are a common aspect of everyday media, including films, television, theatre, digital platforms, novels, comics, theme parks, and video games. When people perceive a work as an adaptation, they recognize its clear link to a previous text, which often continues to shape their experience of the new version. Moreover, "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013, p. 7) as it can stem from different motivations: some aim to honour the original through imitation, while others seek to challenge, reinterpret, or even replace the source material in the audience's perception.

Seen as a formal entity or product, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This 'transcoding' can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation; as a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-) interpretation and then (re-) creation...Therefore, an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative- a work that is second without being secondary (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013, p. 9).

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Films rely on visual spectacle and temporal compression, while literature offers psychological depth, introspection, and narrative fluidity. “Film adaptations can be seen as a kind of multileveled negotiation of intertexts” (Stam 2000, p. 67).

Evelyn Skye’s novel *Damsel*, published in 2023, preceded the film’s release, offering a layered and introspective version of the same story. While the core plot remains, the literary version expands the main character’s interior life and deepens thematic exploration. “The relentless linearity associated with the usual reading of a novel favours the gradual accretion of information about action, characters, atmosphere, ideas” (McFarlane 1996, p. 27).

By comparing the two forms of representation, the paper argues that the novelization enhances feminist storytelling by reclaiming Elodie’s voice and providing critical introspection that is absent in the cinematic portrayal.

In the telling mode- in narrative literature, for example- our engagement begins in the realm of imagination, which is simultaneously controlled by the selected, directing words of the text and liberated- that is, unconstrained by the limits of the visual or aural. We can stop reading at any point; we can re-read or skip ahead; we hold the book in our hands and feel, as well as see, how much of the story remains to be read (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013, p. 23).

The film *Damsel* (2024) offers a subversion of the traditional ‘damsel in distress’ trope, providing a fresh and complex portrayal of a young woman’s journey from passivity to empowerment. Unlike the traditional heroine, whose journey often centres on romantic fulfilment, Eloise’s quest is one of personal survival and self-discovery, ultimately challenging and redefining the genre’s portrayal of women, a celebration of feminine autonomy and resilience.

But with the move to the mode of showing, as in film and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story. And we have moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception with its mix of both detail

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and broad focus. The performance mode teaches us that language is not the only way to express meaning or to relate stories. Visual and gestural representations are rich in complex associations; music offers aural “equivalents” for characters’ emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience; sound, in general, can enhance, reinforce, or even contradict the visual and verbal aspects (Hutcheon and O’Flynn 2013, p. 23).

In McFarlane’s opinion (1996), it is essential to recognise and interpret not only the narrative and cinematic techniques but also the extra-cinematic codes that contribute significantly to meaning-making such as: *language codes*- verbal communication and dialogue styles used by characters that reflect social contexts or cultural identities; *visual codes*-costume, colour, lighting, framing; *non-linguistic sound codes*-background music, sound effects, and silence and *cultural codes*-specific social, historical, or ideological contexts, which influence how audiences decode character behaviour, plot development and themes. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to assert that films are superior to their source novels, as “they can often both evoke quite similar emotions and experiences, but go about doing so with much different executions” (Stan 2025, p.207).

The Quest for Survival: from Traditional ‘Damsel in Distress’ Archetype to Self-Empowered Heroine

Both the film and the novel follow Elodie’s journey from a naive princess to a self-reliant heroine. The central conflict involving Prince Henry’s betrayal and the fight against the dragon is consistent across both representations. The opening line of the film, “There are many stories of chivalry, where the heroic knight saves the damsel in distress. This is not one of them.”, serves as a powerful introduction to Elodie’s story by immediately subverting traditional fairy tale and fantasy tropes. It informs the audience that this narrative will break away from the usual ‘knight-in-shining-armor’ storyline. Instead of a helpless damsel being rescued, Elodie is likely to become the hero of her own story- strong and independent- setting the tone

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for a more modern, empowering tale in which the female protagonist takes control of her destiny and challenges the gender roles of classic stories.

The binary opposition between male and female characters in fairy tales is highlighted by Parsons (2004), who describes the typical female heroine as “weak, submissive, dependent and self-sacrificing” in opposition to the “powerful, active and dominant male character” (Parsons 2004, p. 137). Society educates women from a young age to fit the patriarchal framework in which the focus of gender construction is to “prepare young girls for romantic love and heterosexual practices” and that their “value lies in men’s desire for them” (Parsons 2004, p. 136).

Elodie, a free-spirited princess with a passion for travelling the world, receives a sudden proposal from the queen of Aurea, Queen Isabelle, to marry her son, Prince Henry. The young girl reluctantly accepts the proposal after her father and stepmother, Lord Bayford and Lady Bayford, convince her to do so to save the struggling people of their kingdom. She accepts the marriage alliance not out of love or personal desire, but out of a sense of responsibility. Moreover, Elodie and Floria, her younger sister, are dazzled by the warmth, bounty, and luxury of the Queen’s home, and heartened by their welcome in Aurea. Prince Henry seems to be as charming as fairy tale princes are expected to be. Despite Lady Bayford’s increasing concerns that something is wrong, the wedding goes through, with all the pomp and circumstance a fantasy royal wedding deserves. Following the wedding, an unusual ritual takes place near the entrance of a cave when Queen Isabelle runs her dagger across the newlyweds’ palms and mixes their blood, expressing her deeper thoughts, “Tonight, you join a long line of women who have helped build this kingdom. It is this sacrifice we commemorate every generation. A tradition going back centuries. For generations, it has been our task, our duty, to protect these people.” Elodie quickly learns that Aurea has deadly secrets. The hero/ heroine “and/ or the world in which he finds himself suffers from a symbolical deficiency” (Campbell 2004, p. 35). Every generation,

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three princesses have been sacrificed to the fire-breathing dragon and their lives traded for the kingdom's safety.

Consequently, rather than leading to a honeymoon, the wedding concludes with Elodie's violent descent into a crevasse. This space is described by Campbell (2004, p. 53) as 'a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds, and impossible delight.'"

Prince Henry, initially perceived as a Prince Charming, emerges as a deceptive agent of tradition, undermining the expectations of a romantic hero. Elodie's fall into the cave becomes symbolic. Abandoned and burned, she awakens into agency. The moment she declares "I am not doing what I'm told" marks the rupture of her passive role. She charts her escape through intelligence and emotional resilience, reworking the 'hero's journey archetype' with a gendered twist.

Elodie's journey in the dragon's lair begins while she is still wearing her multi-layered wedding gown, elements of which she gradually repurposes in response to each challenge she faces. Through resourcefulness and creativity, she transforms parts of her attire into tools for survival, enabling her to navigate and overcome the various threats she encounters. Thus, her dress serves as a visual representation of the heroine's growth and transformation throughout the film. It becomes a metaphorical and practical tool for her survival as she uses some of the fabric as protection, rips off parts of it to give her more freedom of movement, or the corset busk, made of metal sharpened into a dagger.

Regarding the film characters, Queen Isabelle's behaviour is premeditated and cruel as she addresses Lady Bayford "Your family needs money. My family needs a bride. What we don't need is more family", highlighting conflicting family needs: one seeks financial support, the other a marital alliance as well as rejecting expanding family ties, emphasizing the desire to avoid further complications within already strained relationships. She perpetuates the cycle of sacrifice, insisting that Elodie should fulfil her duty as a princess. She plays the part of a powerful woman, yet her power is still confined within a male-dominated structure supporting a system where women are ritualistically

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sacrificed. Her role as a loyal matriarch in the service of a kingdom relies on the idea that female suffering can maintain the illusion of peace. In contrast, Lady Brayford successfully avoids the evil stepmother trope, offering a refreshing twist on this classic role. Though there is some tension between Elodie and her stepmother at the beginning of the story, it becomes obvious that she is a kind and courageous woman, standing up for her stepdaughter even when Lord Bayford would not. Her stepmother's warning, "This wedding is a mistake. I only want what's best for you!" foreshadows the treachery ahead, yet Elodie submits to the marriage with dutiful determination, believing in her sacrificial role as a noble daughter.

The visual medium emphasises survival and action through a more visually driven and action-oriented style of the film. Scenes such as the heroine's descent into the dragon's cave or her tactical escape from the burning cavern are central, framed through dynamic camera work and heightened narrative tension. The dragon confronts Elodie with the harsh reality of her situation: "I want what is promised. What is owed? Every generation, your kind must pay". Through their interactions, Elodie learns about the history of the sacrifices and the shared pain of the women who came before her. This knowledge empowers her to confront the injustices of Aurea and to seek a path toward freedom not just for herself but for all the women who have been victimized by the kingdom. Ultimately, Elodie and the dragon forge an unexpected alliance, representing the potential for transformation and the disruption of oppressive cycles.

The lack of internal monologue positions the audience as observers rather than confidants, creating a more ambiguous viewing experience. The film follows a traditional three-act structure, mirroring the fantasy genre's cinematic norms. However, it subverts it by gradually withdrawing the viewer's investment in the male hero and re-centring the story on Elodie. Early in the film, she is shown as the traditional damsel awaiting her fate: "I am not a hero. I'm just someone who has been chosen. I've been told what to do all my life." At the narrative's final moment of confrontation with the dragon, when she stands in defiance, no dialogue is needed. Elodie's firm posture and the

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dragon's hesitation highlight her transformation into the story's true agent, with body language and cinematic space emphasising her newfound autonomy. The dragon's final words, "You were never meant to be the prize, Elodie. You were the warrior all along" reveal a powerful shift in identity and perspective. Elodie, once seen as a passive reward or sacrifice, is recognized as the true heroine of her own story, transforming her from someone acted upon to the one who takes action. McDonough (2017) underlines the fact that modern female characters are described as proactive agents who take control of their destinies, departing from the traditional roles of passivity.

On the other hand, in the book, the writer has the opportunity to explore the backstories of each of these characters. For instance, Queen Isabelle is the conflicted one; she feels awful about what she has been doing, yet she has to carry on "her eyes told a different story, one of centuries of sadness and regret [...] but she carried the weight of the guilt with her" (Skye 2023, p. 81). Prince Henry is a man toughened by duty, having been forced into it at a young age by his older brother: "if there were any other way, we would take it. But there isn't. The dragon demands three sacrifices of royal blood every year or else it will destroy this entire kingdom" (Skye 2023, p. 209).

By contrast, Evelyn Skye's novel allows for reflective pauses, enabling readers to engage with Elodie's introspection and moral dilemmas. Themes of empowerment and survival are reinterpreted through an introspective lens, offering a more profound commentary on feminist ideals, e.g. "I am not just one of the many! My name is Elodie! she shouted. And the other princesses had names, too. [...] You will remember them! You will respect them!" (Skye 2023, p. 165). Her powerful statement expresses a rejection of being reduced to a mere symbol of sacrifice, asserting that her identity and worth extend beyond fulfilling a role defined by duty or tradition. Rather than passively accepting a fate imposed on her, she acknowledges the cost but does so with agency, refusing to be seen only as a tool for others' survival or success. She also discovers she is not the first, but one of many princesses sacrificed.

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Unlike traditional narratives where female characters are often placed in opposition, *Damsel* highlights the importance of solidarity among women as a powerful force for resistance. The markings left behind by previous princesses on the cave walls serve as a testimony to their existence and resistance, offering Elodie guidance and strength. The sisterhood formed from past sacrifices reflects ongoing resistance and solidarity, transforming the image of isolated victims into one of collective strength and defiance against oppression. The evolving relationship between Elodie and the dragon adds depth to the narrative, highlighting themes of empathy and mutual respect. By exploring their interactions, the story underlines the importance of understanding and challenging preconceived notions about others.

The novel opens with her conflicted emotions about the arranged marriage, her loyalty to her people, and her scepticism of Prince Henry's too-perfect demeanour. Once she is thrown into the abyss, the narrative becomes a study in trauma, survival, and determination. The prose allows for extended reflection: Elodie's fear is not just instinctual but existential; her resistance is not just tactical but philosophical. By granting Elodie full interiority, the novel constructs a heroine who reclaims not just her life, but her narrative. It also provides a more in-depth exploration of Elodie's internal struggles, fears, and gradual realization of betrayal in statements such as: "I don't believe in destiny" [...] "I believe in making my own future" (Skye 2023, p. 234) or "I won't give in to you," she said. "If you want my blood, you're going to have to come and get it. (Skye 2023, p. 235). As the young woman reflects on her situation, she internalizes the societal expectations placed upon her: "How could you do this?" she moaned. It was a question for the royal family. For her father. And even for herself, for thinking she could simply marry a stranger and everything would work out not only fine, but happily ever after. Instead, she'd been thrown over a bridge to her death" (Skye 2023, p. 82). Elodie's accusatory question to her father, "Did you know, Father? Did you willingly sell me to a dragon?" (Skye 2023, p. 145) frames the act not only as treachery but as complicity in a patriarchal system that objectifies women. The betrayal catalyses her transformation, propelling her into a

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quest for survival, self-determination, and self-reliance. The dungeon setting serves as a symbol for the patriarchal world Eloise inhabits, which is dangerous and hostile. However, it is in this space of oppression that Eloise begins to forge her path toward autonomy, marking the beginning of her transformation from victim to heroine.

The book's ending is more complex than the film's, as Elodie and the dragon undergo a mystical merging process that enables Elodie to transform into a dragon: "But then Elodie unfurled her wings and smiled. She was a queen. A dragon. But most of all, she was herself. And she soared. To all the brave souls who dare to remake the world." (Skye 2023, p. 256) highlights a moment of self-empowerment, e.g., "I will save myself!" Elodie cried. (Skye 2023, p. 193). Elodie embraces her new identity and emerges as a symbol for all individuals aspiring to contribute meaningfully to society. Although she is not invincible, her perseverance in the face of vulnerability and uncertainty enhances her complexity and renders her a more compelling protagonist. She chooses not to see the dragon as a bad omen, a common trope, but instead embraces it as a symbol of the extraordinary- a positive foreshadowing. "Dragons weren't real, only fantasy. This was no bad omen. If anything, it was a symbol of the extraordinary to come" (Skye 2023, p. 12). The phrase "extraordinary to come" hints at future events that will break from the ordinary, preparing the reader for an adventure or turning point. The dragon becomes a symbolic figure, not of fear, but of transformation or greatness. These sentences challenge the boundary between reality and myth. The heroine's optimism and openness to wonder suggest that the narrative is about to shift into a more magical or extraordinary realm.

Gheran (2022) suggests that the dragon symbolizes the people's longing to break free from restrictions and limitations, representing 'human aspiration' and 'inner strength'. Traditionally depicted as an embodiment of evil to be vanquished by a male hero, the dragon in *Damsel* is reimagined as a misunderstood figure, a mother seeking retribution for the death of her three newborns. Thus, Elodie understands that even if she and her sister escaped the dragon, others would take their

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place, and the cycle of violence would persist. Rather than killing the dragon, she employs the glowworms to heal its wounds, thereby restoring it from the verge of death.

Through Elodie's exposure of the truth and her demonstration of empathy, the dragon becomes an unexpected ally. In Elodie, the dragon at last finds a companion it can trust, someone just, kind, and entirely different from the king of Aurea and his family. This reconfiguration of the monstrous feminine recasts the final act as a collective rebellion against a shared oppressor: the kingdom of Aurea. By allying with the dragon and orchestrating her sister's rescue, Elodie reshapes the classic David and Goliath paradigm, not by slaying the monster, but by redefining the true source of monstrosity. It is not the dragon, but the monarchy, that perpetuates sacrifice and deceit. Queen Isabelle's cryptic remark, "You know nothing of our story", reveals the generational complicity in this patriarchal legacy. Elodie, however, refuses to follow the expected script, ultimately confronting the queen and declaring: "This is the end of your story".

Eloise and the Dragon: Mirrored Journeys of Self-Discovery and Agency

Bradford et al define *agency* as "the making of choices and taking responsibility for them, in accepting the moral imperatives, which in a properly functioning civil society should determine 'the choice we choose'" (Bradford et al 2008, p. 31). In their view, agency fundamentally arises from the interplay of making decisions, executing those decisions, and assuming responsibility for the resulting actions; therefore, "to be able to act -to have agency also means being able to answer for our actions, to be responsible" (Bradford et al 2008, p. 33).

Throughout the film, Eloise uncovers deeper truths not only about her world but also about herself. The magical elements, such as hidden prophecies and ancient artifacts, serve as metaphors for her hidden potential. For instance, Eloise might discover a family legacy or a magical power that has been concealed from her, revealing that she is capable of shaping her

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destiny, independent of the men who have previously defined her world. Her self-discovery is also marked by the realization that the script society has prescribed for her - marriage to a prince and submission to male authority- is not the only way for her to define her life. Her ability to escape and take control of her fate sets the stage for the rest of her journey, where she asserts herself as an independent force. Rather than passively waiting to be rescued or relying on others, Eloise repeatedly demonstrates her problem-solving skills and tenacity. Elodie's agency is expressed through action and survival, culminating in her defiance of the queen and the dragon. When faced with dangerous situations, the young girl takes initiative, uses clever tactics to outwit enemies, avoids danger through quick thinking, and takes risks to save herself, often when there is no immediate hope for external help. These repeated moments of self-reliance demonstrate Eloise's growth as an individual capable of navigating danger on her own terms. Each instance highlights the heroic quality of self-preservation in a world designed to break her down. As she rejects the role of the passive princess waiting to be rescued, Eloise begins to chart a new path for herself, one that allows her to embrace her strength, not as a product of romantic love, but as a result of her own growth, decision-making, and internal power. The story strategically subverts traditional binary oppositions such as hero/victim, masculine/feminine, and protector/protected, thereby revealing their inherent instability and cultural construction. Rather than embracing victimhood, Elodie asserts, "They chose me to die. I choose to live," a moment that deconstructs the binary of hero vs. victim by repositioning herself as both the subject and the agent of resistance. Her refusal to perform the concept of femininity embodied by obedience and sacrifice undermines the masculine/feminine binary by appropriating traditionally masculine-coded traits such as aggression, autonomy, and strategic thinking. The traditional protector/protected dichotomy is subverted in this context: whereas the king and prince are ostensibly the guardians of the realm, they are ultimately exposed as perpetrators of violence. In contrast, Elodie and the dragon become the true protectors of others and of the truth itself.

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The climax of Eloise's change occurs when she confronts Prince Henry. By this point, Eloise is no longer a young woman defined by others' expectations. She has grown into a true heroine, capable of using her physical, magical, and intellectual abilities to fight back and reclaim her agency. The princess steps up as a leader, offering advice, taking action to protect others, and using her newfound abilities to guide people to safety or stability. This reflects a mature sense of responsibility and a willingness to help others. Thus, her decision to embrace leadership emphasises her growing recognition of her power and responsibility within the world. Her victory is not simply about defeating a villain; it is about asserting control over her fate, self-identity, and personal freedom. In reclaiming her identity, she demonstrates a powerful form of heroism, one rooted not in physical courage but in autonomy, resilience, and the refusal to remain a victim.

Rather than a romantic resolution, the story ends with Elodie, her sister Floria, and their stepmother returning home, accompanied by the dragon, with the opportunity to determine their upcoming lives moving forward.

The dragon's journey through the narrative is, at its core, a story of metamorphosis as well. Initially portrayed as a revengeful creature, its rage is rooted in deep personal loss and betrayal, as previously mentioned. However, the dragon's encounter with Elodie marks a turning point. Unlike the royals it once knew, the young woman approaches the creature with compassion and a willingness to see beyond its monstrous exterior. This empathy creates the space for the dragon's gradual conversion- from a symbol of destruction to one of renewal. Its journey from vengeance to guardianship mirrors a process of emotional restoration. No longer anchored to the ruins of Aurea, the dragon finds purpose in protection and peace, not in retribution. Its choice to accompany the young princess signifies not only personal healing but also a broader hope for reconciliation and change, and a step toward supporting Elodie in her quest to bring peace and prosperity to her people.

The dragon's transformation serves as a similar journey to Elodie's, creating a dual narrative of healing, justice, and self-

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discovery. While Elodie pursues the more visible path of a human protagonist challenging oppression and reclaiming her voice, the dragon also undergoes a profound metamorphosis, reflecting the classic stages of the hero's journey. Their intertwined stories demonstrate that transformation is achieved through compassion rather than violence. Both characters confront inherited ferocity and resist the roles imposed upon them, ultimately emerging transformed. Their parallel evolution from victimhood to agency gradually dissolves the initial opposition, culminating in a meaningful partnership. Through mutual recognition and empathy, Elodie and the dragon forge a bond rooted in shared purpose. This transformation from dichotomy to alliance redefines them not as adversaries, but as co-agents of justice, suggesting that true change emerges not through dominance, but through solidarity and compassion.

The final image of the boat sailing toward freedom, not a castle, replaces the happily ever after traditional ending with a self-determined future. Her journey is not toward marriage, but toward self-discovery. "The story of their lives has not been written yet, as they're flying away. [We wanted] to leave you with this idea that we've been through our inverted version of the fairy tale. It's our inverted version of happily ever after" (Gomez, 8 march 2024).

Conclusion

Eloise's journey of survival and self-discovery in *Damsel*, characterised by her resilience and personal growth, challenges and expands conventional notions of heroism. By subverting the classic trope of the 'damsel in distress', the film and the book analyse the limitations placed on women in both fantasy narratives and society at large. Eloise's journey highlights the importance of agency and rejecting predefined roles in the pursuit of personal autonomy. Whether she is escaping a dungeon, taming a fire-breathing dragon, confronting betrayal, or leading others, Eloise demonstrates that true heroism lies in personal agency, overcoming fear, and having the courage to shape one's own fate. While both the film and the novel

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adaptation of *Damsel* share a foundational narrative, the novel offers a more nuanced and extended exploration of the story's themes and characters. The differences in ending, character development, and thematic depth highlight the unique strengths of each medium in storytelling. For readers seeking a more culturally enriched interpretation of the narrative, the novel serves as a valuable and compelling counterpart to the film.

Consequently, *Damsel* becomes more than a fantasy; it offers a modern reimagining for a contemporary generation where the dragon is not an enemy to be destroyed, but a being to be heard, and where the princess does not passively wait for rescue, but takes action and dismantles the very structures meant to confine her.

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