

DECONSTRUCTING MOTHERHOOD IN *TANGLED* (2010): A DERRIDEAN ANALYSIS OF MOTHER GOTHEL

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Abstract

Film is a visual art form that communicates stories, information, and messages through moving images and sound. It combines various elements such as screenplay, acting, cinematography, directing, music, and editing. Many films also address current social or philosophical themes. A notable example is *Tangled* (2010), directed by Nathan Greno and Byron Howard and produced by Disney as part of its series of princess films. This journal analyzes the character of Mother Gothel using Jacques Derrida's post-structuralist approach. It looks at how binary oppositions like mother/monster and freedom/control are called into question. The analysis suggests that *Tangled* exposes the inherent instability of language, identity, and moral judgment within its narrative framework when deconstructed.

Keywords: Deconstruction, Mother Gothel, Post-Structuralism, Motherhood, *Tangled* (2010)

INTRODUCTION

In literary and film studies, post-structuralism offers a radical departure from traditional modes of interpretation, challenging the notion of stable meaning and objective truth (Crick, 2016). Emerging in the mid-20th century, mainly as a critique of structuralism's search for underlying, universal systems of meaning, post-structuralist thought, particularly as articulated by Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction, posits that texts are inherently open to multiple interpretations, often revealing internal contradictions and hierarchies rather than singular, fixed messages. Directed by Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, Disney's *Tangled* (2010) reimagines the classic Rapunzel fairy tale. The story centers on Rapunzel, a princess abducted as an infant by manipulative Mother Gothel, who keeps Rapunzel isolated in a hidden tower, exploiting her magical, long blonde hair, which contains a mystical sun drop's rejuvenating power to maintain her eternal youth. On her 18th birthday, Rapunzel, longing to see the "floating lights" (lanterns released annually by her true parents, the King and Queen, in her memory), enlists the help of charming thief Flynn Rider (Eugene Fitzherbert), who stumbles upon her tower.

Disney's *Tangled* (2010) is an animated musical fantasy that ostensibly narrates the



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classic Rapunzel fairy tale. However, its seemingly straightforward plot offers fertile ground for a post-structuralist reading, particularly through Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. The film introduces Rapunzel, a princess abducted as an infant by Mother Gothel, who exploits Rapunzel's magically endowed hair for eternal youth. Confined in a hidden tower, Rapunzel is subjected to Gothel's manipulative rhetoric, which constructs a "safe" reality within the tower against a "dangerous" exterior, thus establishing a foundational binary of presence (security/captivity) and absence (freedom/threat) based on a post-structuralist perspective.

Mother Gothel is not merely a villain but a site for deconstructing the concept of "motherhood." Her interactions with Rapunzel are dominated by manipulative discourses that establish a rigid binary: the tower represents "safety" and "home" under her care. At the same time, the outside world is painted as "dangerous" and "forbidden." This rhetoric, epitomized by songs like "Mother Knows Best," simultaneously constructs and undermines the ideal of unconditional maternal love. Gothel's actions continually reveal the inherent contradictions within her self-proclaimed maternal role, exhibiting possessiveness and emotional abuse while simultaneously performing the practical duties of a caregiver. The film, through Gothel's character, thus invites a critical examination of how maternal authority is discursively produced and sustained, exposing the instability of meaning around familial bonds and challenging simplistic categorizations of "good" versus "evil" motherhood. As Rapunzel's magical hair is severed, her eventual demise symbolizes the literal breaking down of a constructed power dynamic that has defined their relationship, leaving the audience to confront the complexities and ambiguities inherent in such a deconstructed maternal figure.

The film *Tangled* (2010) has attracted scholarly attention across various disciplines, including film studies, gender studies, literature, and education. One of the key areas explored in previous research is the representation of Rapunzel as a symbol of female empowerment. Ali (2022), in *An Analysis of Elements and Symbols Found in Disney's Tangled (2010) Using Vladimir Propp's Structural Approach*, analyzes the narrative elements and symbols in *Tangled* using Vladimir Propp's structural framework to identify the functions and character patterns that shape the story. From a narrative and intertextual perspective, Malik (2025), in *Multimodal Analysis of the Movie Tangled (2010)*, explores how various modes such as visuals, dialogue, and music work together to convey meaning, emotion, and narrative depth in Disney's *Tangled*, offering insights into how multimodality enhances storytelling in animated films. Malinda and Suyadi (2019) in *An Analysis of Pragmatism Study of Conversational Maxim used in Tangled*, examine how the main character's dialogue in Disney's *Tangled* reflects Grice's (1975) conversational maxims quality, quantity, relation, and manner within the framework of pragmatics. Using a descriptive qualitative method, they identify that the maxim of quantity appears most frequently, indicating that the amount of information conveyed plays a central role in achieving cooperative and effective communication within the film's conversations.

Additionally, Davies (2021), writing for the Journal of Children's Media and Education, explores the film's moral and educational dimensions, identifying life lessons such as the value of courage, honesty, and the journey toward self-discovery. These studies suggest that *Tangled* (2010) serves not merely as entertainment but as a complex cultural text rich with meaning and open to multidimensional analysis. Nevertheless, there remains a gap in critically interpreting the film through specific theoretical frameworks, such as post-structuralism or deconstruction, which have yet to be fully explored in existing literature.

This paper aims to analyze the character of Mother Gothel in the film *Tangled* using Jacques Derrida's post-structuralist approach, especially the deconstruction theory. The film focuses on how it deconstructs binary oppositions such as good/evil, mother/monster, and love/control in its narrative structure. The scope of the discussion includes an understanding of deconstruction theory, the concept of binary opposition, and its application in reading the character of Mother Gothel

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study employs a qualitative film analysis approach to thoroughly examine the cinematic and narrative elements of *Tangled* (2010). This method centers on active viewing and systematic data annotation beyond passive film consumption. The researchers conducted multiple film viewings to understand the overall narrative comprehensively. Subsequent sessions focused on identifying scenes, dialogues, character expressions, color usage, music, and camera techniques. This approach echoes the method used by Malik et al. (2025), who argue that multimodal analysis enables scholars to explore how various semiotic modes such as image, gesture, color, and sound construct layered meanings and emotional nuance in animated films.

Annotations were made in detail, accompanied by timestamps to facilitate efficient data referencing during the analysis process. Key visual moments were captured as screenshots to serve as interpretative supporting data. Each still image was supplemented with descriptive captions and time markers to highlight aesthetic or symbolic aspects relevant to the research focus. All annotations and visual captures were organized thematically based on analytical categories such as character development, thematic motifs, and cinematic techniques. When combined with structural and post-structural perspectives, this multimodal approach provides a deeper reading of the film's ideological and symbolic construction. For instance, Ali and Guneratne (2022) utilize Propp's structuralist framework to show how *Tangled* retains traditional narrative roles while introducing modern complexity.

This study draws from Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory, which challenges binary oppositions and fixed meanings in texts to extend the analysis beyond structure. According to Derrida (1976), meaning is not inherent but generated through *différance*, the play of differences and deferral of meaning between oppositional concepts. In the context of *Tangled*, binary pairs such as mother vs. monster and freedom vs. control are

not stable categories but dynamic tensions that deconstruct each other and reveal ideological contradictions embedded in the narrative.

Binary Opposition: Mother/Monster

This binary opposition is powerfully embodied in the character of Mother Gothel, whose surface-level nurturing persona masks manipulative intent. In multiple scenes, Gothel comforts Rapunzel with affectionate words and touch while instilling fear about the outside world. Malinda and Suyadi (2019) note that such dialogue violates Grice's conversational maxims, particularly quality and relation, in which Gothel conceals truth under the guise of concern, reinforcing her psychological dominance.



Figure 1. Scene from *Tangled* (2010, [14:50 - 15:00]).

Mother Gothel: "Rapunzel, do not ever talk about leaving this tower anymore."

Rapunzel: "Yes, mother."

Mother Gothel: "I love you very much, dear."

Gothel seems to show affection for Rapunzel, as depicted in the scene when she gently strokes Rapunzel's hair and speaks sweetly to her (see Figure 1). The gestures and dialogues in this scene emphasize her identity as a loving mother.



Figure 2: Scene from Tangled (2010, [13:43–13:45]).

Mother Gothel: "Cannibals and snakes, the plague." Rapunzel: "NO!"
Mother Gothel: "Yes!"

However, Gothel also uses fear as a means of control. In another scene (Figure 2), she scares Rapunzel with stories about the dangers of the outside world, emphasizing that Rapunzel will not be able to survive outside the tower. This is done not because of genuine concern for Rapunzel's safety, but rather as a manipulative strategy so that Rapunzel never goes out and stays away from her.

Ali and Guneratne (2022) further argue that *Tangled* reworks the classical fairy-tale motif of the caregiver into a hybrid character whose maternal facade masks monstrous self-interest. This duality reflects Derrida's idea that binary categories are always interdependent and inherently unstable. The concept of "mother" cannot be fully understood without invoking its opposite, "monster," and vice versa. As Derrida (1976) posits, these terms rely on each other for meaning. However, they are also susceptible to inversion, making Mother Gothel's identity a site of contradiction: she is both nurturer and captor, protector and predator. This inversion highlights the constructedness of



maternal authority in patriarchal storytelling.

Figure 3-4: Scene from *Tangled* (2010, [04:30–04:40]).



Rapunzel: "Why can't I go outside?"

Mother Gothel: "The outside world is a dangerous place. Full of selfish and greedy people. You must stay here. Do you understand, flower?"

In this scene, Rapunzel is asking why she cannot go outside because she is curious. Mother Gothel answered with something negative so that Rapunzel would not go outside. She wants to keep Rapunzel all for herself. This makes the role of "mother" in Gothel's role as a mother questionable because a mother is supposed to be honest. Although Gothel holds the status of a mother, locking Rapunzel away for her benefit is selfish.

Jacques Derrida's ideas help us understand that meaning is not just set in stone; it is shaped by how things relate to each other, which he calls (Derrida, 1976). In this case, the idea of "mother" does not make sense; it needs to be considered alongside "monster." The two concepts influence each other and can even swap places. Roland Barthes also points out that what gives a story its significance comes from how it is interpreted by readers, not just from the roles characters claim to play (The Death of the Author, 1967). This means that how we understand Gothel comes from our take on her actions rather than just the label she gives herself.

Binary Opposition: Freedom/Control

In *Tangled*, the opposition between freedom and control is strongly depicted through Rapunzel's life under the supervision of Mother Gothel. At first glance, Rapunzel seems safe and free to create in the tower, painting, reading, and singing.

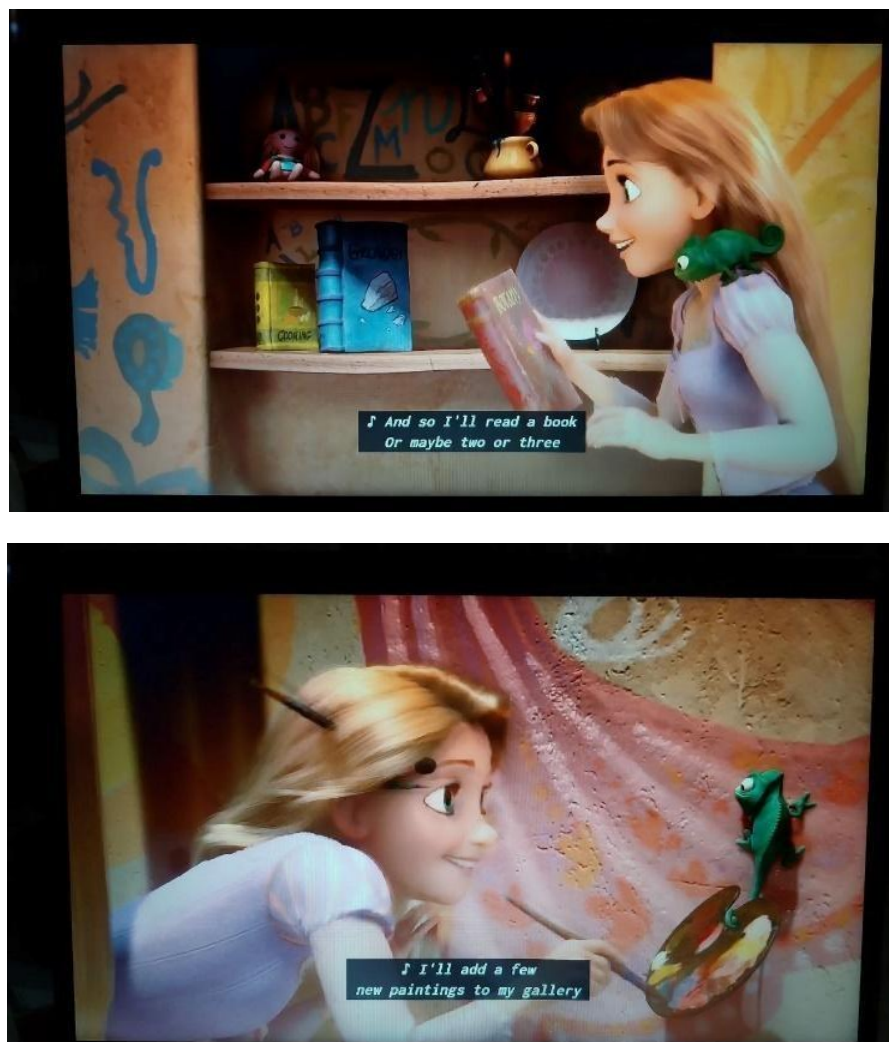


Figure 5-6: Scene from Tangled (2010, [06:30–06:45]).

Rapunzel: “And so I’ll read a book or maybe two or three. I will add a few new paintings to my gallery. I play guitar, knit, and cook. Just wondering when my life will begin.”

In this scene (figure 5-6), Rapunzel is free to do whatever she wants if she stays inside the house. She cooks, paints, reads, and even plays the guitar. This makes her happy because she has things to do. However, she can only do those same things repeatedly, which eventually becomes boring. In reality, she lives in physical and psychological confinement. Gothel controls the information Rapunzel receives, scares her about the outside world, and covers up her true identity. However, the repetition of activities and her lack of external contact signal a subtler form of captivity. Malik et al. (2025) show that the film’s vibrant colors and open spaces mask spatial entrapment through multimodal layering. The illusion of agency is carefully framed through lighting, camera angles, and color design, suggesting comfort while reinforcing enclosure.

Derrida’s deconstructive lens defines this binary of freedom vs. control as not oppositional but mutually constitutive. Rapunzel’s “freedom” exists only within Gothel’s

rules, making it an illusory state shaped by a hidden architecture of domination. As Derrida (1976) emphasizes, the meaning of freedom is deferred; it is never fully realized, always about the control that conditions it. Malinda and Suyadi (2019) reinforce this by showing how Gothel manipulates dialogue and information to maintain power while allowing Rapunzel to feel “safe,” thus blurring the boundary between protective care and oppressive confinement. In this way, the tower becomes a metaphor for ideological conditioning; what looks like liberty is a curated illusion of autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This analysis demonstrates that *Tangled* (2010) intricately challenges and deconstructs the binary oppositions traditionally embedded in fairy tale discourse, particularly the oppositions of mother vs. monster and freedom vs. control. Drawing from Derrida’s (1976) deconstruction theory, the film reveals how these seemingly rigid dualities are not fixed or essential, but rather relational, fluid, and interdependent. The character of Mother Gothel operates as a central site of this destabilization. She is portrayed simultaneously as a protective maternal figure and a manipulative antagonist, blurring the line between care and cruelty. Her use of endearments, gentle gestures, and persuasive speech evokes the nurturing image of motherhood. However, these same tools function to dominate, isolate, and exploit Rapunzel for the selfish preservation of youth.

Here, the binary mother/monster collapses under scrutiny. Gothel is neither maternal nor monstrous; she is both, and the film refuses to resolve this tension. According to Derrida, this is the nature of binary opposition: one term is always privileged (in this case, “mother” as nurturer), while the other is devalued (the “monster” as threat), yet their meanings are interdependent. In *Tangled*, the boundaries blur so thoroughly that the audience is forced to question the grounds of moral and emotional alignment. Gothel’s duality represents what Derrida calls *differance*, a deferral and difference in meaning that destabilizes any singular interpretation. Her identity only makes sense regarding the tension between these terms, not in adherence to either pole.

Similarly, the narrative’s treatment of Rapunzel’s agency deconstructs the binary of freedom vs. control. At the surface, Rapunzel’s life in the tower appears autonomous and creatively rich. She sings, paints, reads, and dreams, seemingly free to explore her inner world. However, this illusion of freedom is revealed to be intricately constructed by Gothel’s psychological control, misinformation, and fear tactics. Malinda and Suyadi (2019) argue that the tower is both a physical and epistemological prison that restricts knowledge, mobility, and self-definition. Rapunzel’s supposed freedom is merely the internalized effect of sustained control, echoing Derrida’s argument that freedom cannot be understood in isolation from its structural opposition, control, because its meaning is always constituted through deferral and contrast (Derrida, 1981).

Moreover, as explored by Malik et al. (2025), multimodal elements in the film enhance this binary disruption. The interplay of visuals, sound, and dialogue constructs a world that is aesthetically bright and emotionally warm, even as it masks manipulation and

entrapment. This multimodal harmony is a symbolic veil, hiding deeper asymmetries of power and knowledge. Ali and Guneratne (2022) further illustrate that the film embeds symbolic reversals such as the golden hair, a traditional marker of divine beauty and innocence, becoming a source of imprisonment, adding layers to the film's engagement with deconstructive critique.

Ultimately, *Tangled* does not merely offer a feminist reimagining or an empowering heroine within a revised fairy tale. It functions as a poststructuralist text that interrogates the very foundations of dichotomous thinking. It exposes how meaning is never stable but always produced in opposition, how identities are never pure but always hybrid, and how moral positions are not absolute but constructed. Through the collapse of binaries like mother/monster, freedom/control, truth/deception, and even love/exploitation, the film invites viewers to see how narratives and the ideologies behind them are contingent, constructed, and always open to reinterpretation. In this sense, *Tangled* becomes not just a modern fairy tale but a site of ideological resistance, aligning powerfully with Derrida's vision of deconstruction as a means to uncover and challenge the hidden hierarchies in cultural texts.

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