Deconstructing the figure of the villain in the television series *Once Upon a Time*

La deconstrucción de la figura del villano en la serie de televisión Érase una vez

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Abstract

The object of study of this article is the most widely distributed fantasy series worldwide: *Once Upon a Time* (Kitsis & Horowitz, 2011-2018), a fiction that connects the Disney universe with folk tales and Greek mythology. The research is circumscribed to the figure of the villain, the Evil Queen, because, although there are other models of villains in the series, this character prevails in all seasons. The article focuses on a character analysis with the primary objective of investigating the transformation arc of the villain in the series. The methodology employed is of a qualitative-descriptive nature, since it goes from the review of the theories of characters, script and villainy to a content analysis that, although based on previous studies, incorporates inclusive approaches and the characteristics and functionality of the villain to the matrix, which makes it replicable for future research of this same nature. Among the main results is that the character of the Evil Queen undergoes and develops a radical transformation arc, both physically and psychologically, which results in character growth that diverges significantly from more traditional representations of villainy.

Keywords: character; villain; television series; *Once Upon a Time*; Evil Queen

Resumen

El objeto de estudio de este artículo es la serie de fantasía más distribuida a nivel mundial: *Érase una vez* (Kitsis & Horowitz, 2011-2018), una ficción que conecta el universo Disney con los cuentos populares y la mitología griega. La investigación se circunscribe en la figura de la villana, la Reina Malvada, porque, aunque existen otros modelos de villanos en la serie, este personaje prevalece en todas las temporadas. El artículo se centra en un análisis de personajes con el objetivo principal de indagar en el arco de transformación de la villana en la serie. La metodología empleada es de carácter cualitativo-descriptivo, ya que va de la revisión de las teorías de personajes, del guion y la villanía, a un análisis de contenido que, aunque se basa en estudios previos, incorpora planteamientos inclusivos y las características y funcionalidad propias de la villanía a la matriz , lo que la hace replicable para futuras investigaciones de esta misma índole. Entre los resultados principales se cuentan que el personaje de la Reina Malvada transita y desarrolla un arco de transformación radical tanto en el plano físico como en el psicológico que ofrece un crecimiento del personaje más bien alejado de las representaciones más tradicionales de la villanía.

Palabras clave: personaje; villano; series de televisión; *Once upon a time*; Reina Malvada

1. Introduction

Over the past years, different TV shows based or inspired on myths have become hugely popular around the world. The most heavily distributed series –in 190 countries– is *Once Upon a Time* (Kitsis & Horowitz, 2011-2018). *Once Upon…* draws from the Disney universe and its traditional heroes, as well as from Greek mythology in its fifth season, in order to make it easily recognizable to international audiences and, therefore, more engaging for them (Olechowska, 2021). Very well-known stories, strongly rooted in both popular imagination and culture, are included as crucial elements with which the series crafts its own mythology. Its writers claim that it is a series "of characters" (Campbell, 2011) and that they were not interested in revamping stories for a contemporary audience, but in delving into "who is who" in the stories and why the characters act in a certain way. Based on this assumption, this case study focuses on a character analysis.

Once Upon a Time is a seven-seasons fantasy drama TV show aired between 2011 and 2018[1]. The episodes last between 40 and 45 minutes. Produced in the United States, the first episode of the series was broadcast on the ABC channel, a company from the Walt Disney Company's Disney Entertainment division. Although the series' theme is based on traditional and widely-known characters and plots from the Disney universe, both characters and plots are far more complex than the originals and the series heavily stress the reasons and motivations driving characters' acts.

The series is set in Storybrooke, a small town in Maine, in the East coast of the United States, where all the inhabitants have forgotten their previous lives and identities. Although the characters live in the real world, there are flashbacks that inform audiences of their fairy-tale personas and which help them to understand the real story and motivations of each character. In other words, each character has two personas: one living in the real world and another in its fairytale counterpart (Mahler, 2017). All episodes featuring the Evil Queen character, also known as Regina in the real world, were analyzed. Being a very extensive object of study, regarding the number of seasons and episodes, as well as the depth and complexity of characters, plots, and storytelling features, we limited

the research to this villain: Although there are numerous characters playing as villains at different times over the story, the Evil Queen is the central figure, embodying the archetype of the villain in a very representative, but also complex way. She is the first villain appearing in the series and the main narrative engine at the very early stages of the show. Indeed, her curse moves the enchanted forest's inhabitants to Storybrooke, the triggering event of the story. Evil Queen maintains a constant presence throughout the series, evolving from a feared and hated character to one of the most complex and redeemed in the narrative. Additionally, she incarnates the role of villain in a very archetypical way within the structure of the fairy tales in which the series is inspired and, in doing so, she might easily fit as a villain within the popular imagination. The character's evolution within the narrative depicts her edges by exploring the motivations behind her actions, an internal struggle between good and evil that is featured throughout the series. Therefore, her development offers a deep analysis of the building-up of villains and the chances of redemption, an aspect rather overlooked when comparing to the previous and deeper attention triggered by other villains from the same show (DeLong, 2015; Lombari, 2015).

Therefore, the article aims are: 1) To analyse the arc of transformation of the villain, the Evil Queen, in the series *Once Upon a Time*; 2) To draw parallels between the arc of transformation of the villain and her physical and psychological traits and costumes; 3) To verify whether the arc of transformation of the Evil Queen follows that of the villain archetype or, on the contrary, is aimed at deconstructing the character; 4) To determine whether the arc of transformation of this character corresponds to the series' central premise.

Our research hypothesis is the following: In *Once Upon a Time*, the villain is deconstructed through both her psychological and physical transformations, in keeping with the show's main assumption. The article critically contributes to better understanding the characters' journeys of their metamorphosis in contemporary audiovisual productions; and, in doing so, it helps to gain further insights into contemporary popular culture reaching global audiences, such as a show produced and widely distributed by a giant as Disney.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Analysis of characters and their arcs of transformation

In the field of visual narrative, the character emerges as the cornerstone on which to build up audience participation, thematic exploration, and the construction of meaning. In other words, the character is not just an element among many others in the story. Studying the character in the field is intrinsically interdisciplinary, as it draws from a rich variety of academic fields: literary theory, film and television studies, psychology, and sociology, among others.

At this point, classic works, such as Chatman's (1990) or Bal's (1985), are still relevant as long as classic narratological concepts endure in the contemporary analysis of the audiovisual character. Greimas' (1971) theory of the actant still provides a model to better understand the roles played by characters in the narrative structure. Character archetypes, popularized by Jung (2002) and Campbell (2015), are still useful when analyzing how certain universal character patterns resonate with audiences across different cultures and times. More recent studies point to the complexity of the fictional character as "they remind one of real persons, but at the same time they seem to consist of mediated signs only" (Eder, 2010a, p.3).

The analysis of how and to what extent audiovisual characters represent (or do not) diverse identities has become an area of growing importance. This might have an impact on the public's perceptions, social attitudes, and our mutual cultural understanding. Critical race theory, feminist film theory, and queer theory offer fundamental tools for analyzing the power dynamics and ideologies underlying character representations. Eder's contribution (2010b) is part of this trend and his concept of the "clock of character" that distinguishes between four aspects of characters: (1) As artifacts, they are shaped by audiovisual information; (2) As fictional beings they have certain bodily, mental, and social features; (3) As symbols, they spread higher-level meanings; and (4) As symptoms they point to socio-cultural causes in their production and to effects in their reception. In this same path Bertetti (2014) points out that "characters are cultural and social constructs, although they are manifested by a text and they are

the result of textual procedures" (p.2344). Casetti y Di Chio (1999) talk about[2] "The need to study television products in relation to the cultural processes that mark the rhythm of social life" (p. 293). This aligns to some cognitive approaches suggesting that "in the production, as well as the reception of stories, human beings think of characters as human beings first" (Schneider, 2013, p.130).

Both Pérez Rufi's (2016) and Garrido's (1996) works follow these approaches, aiming to bring together as many perspectives as possible. They propose "the signs of being" referring to identify those features that, in the sense of Chatman (1990), have to do with adjective narratives that classify a personal quality of characters, when this persists during part or all of the story, which not only individualises and isolates them but also justifies their behaviour and relationships. This includes physical traits or physiology and psychological unity or character, the former including age, sex, physical description (weight, height, eye and hair colour, bearing, etc.) and defining features, such as defects or other peculiarities (Egri, 2004). This study makes a distinction between physiognomy and costumes, while understanding that physical identity underpins the character.

Regarding the psychological dimension, there are flat and round characters (Chatman, 1990; Casetti & Di Chio, 2007). The former is understood as a simple and one-dimensional one; the latter, a more complex and varied character. In the same path, previous literature on this topic has describe static and dynamic characters, where the former is considered a stable, constant, and reliable one; while the latter would be a rather constantly evolving character affecting his or her treats, attitudes, and behaviors.

Garrido (1996) discusses the concept of action and relationship, which includes a variety of activities and behaviors. According to Chatman (1990), happenings can be understood as having different beginnings and ends. These events are intricately connected to the timeline and closely linked to other characters. Characters should be supplemented by script theory, which considers them as "people" beyond the role that they play in a story. In this regard, there are two key concepts: the arc of transformation and the coherence of emotions.

The arc of transformation refers to the internal change that a character experiences throughout

a film, a series, or any other audiovisual work. It seems fair to assume that the main characters undergo a change from the beginning and to the end of a story (Brenes, 2012) or, if not, at least they influence other characters. Initially, the main characters strive to reach a goal and are tested throughout the plot. If and when they manage to reach their goal, this process has contributed to their personal development; if not, this is perhaps because the intention of the story is to highlight their internal growth, understood as an improvement on their initial state.

Although it is closely related to the plot, the dramatic arc of transformation is a useful structure for designing characters, namely, a sort of scheme that serves to represent the story that is going to be told from their inner selves (Sánchez-Escalonilla, 2013). This has to do with how more or less crucial events are addressed in the narrative, which finally lead to turning points that change everything that subsequently befalls a character (Smith, 2006).

Following Sánchez-Escalonilla (2001), there are different types of arcs of transformation: Flat arcs (the character and its traits remain practically unchanged), Moderate arcs (an intermediate, rather superficial transformation that can reinforce characters or disrupt their private lives), Radical arcs of transformation (Characters undergo a very profound transformation, which makes them embrace a totally different life's perspective), Traumatic arcs (characters undergo such a radical change that they appear to be totally different people), Circular arcs (Characters undergo a deep transformation at a midpoint in the plot, but then return to their initial state in its final stages, but positively transformed by their experience).

Drawing from all this cues, audiences can develop mental models of the characters and deploy reception strategies such as categorization (linking a character to a certain type or group), individuation (recognizing the character's unique features) or decategorization (revising initial categorizations as more information is revealed), and personalization (making a personal connection with the character).

2.2. The villain

From a classical point of view (Propp, 2001), the villain is a character whose main aim is to bring the heroes down, preventing them from completing their journey (Campbell, 2015). Villains are the enemies that heroes have to defeat in the final stages of the plot to achieve glory. Under the frame of archetypes of Jung's (2002) theory of the collective unconscious, the villain is considered a shadow, that is, a character embodying negative traits representing the part of the psyche opposed to the conscious self that everyone has but hides to conceal their weaknesses. The shadow represents the unexpressed or the unfulfilled, suppressed emotions and deepest feelings that can lead to a person's downfall (Vogler, 2002).

The villains' immorality is part of their personalities as Western cultural thought has discussed over the past centuries: Evil is part of the self because it is interesting and attractive for humans; in other words, whatever is morally inappropriate has a certain appeal (Nietzsche, 2012). Evil is heavily rooted in our inner being because it constitutes the very human being nature, as with love and desire. But to identify and characterise evil requires to spot good and, in doing so, settling the conflicting element (Cláudio, 2009). Then, regardless of how evil is conceived, it tends to be socially rejected (Hobbes, 2003) and, consequently, overrides the presence of good (Tausiet, 2009). Contemporary authors have critically thought about evil by analysing the way in which it is currently represented, considering its circulation among people morally blind (Bauman & Donskis, 2019). Then, a story's antagonist embodies wickedness (Gubern, 1991).

In the entertainment industry, particularly in broadcasting, streaming, or films, the villain is portrayed as an evil and selfish individual, with little to no empathy, and who tends to embody the story's antagonist and the adversary of the main character. It tends to be the main driving force behind the story that pushes its progress in an exciting and engaging fashion (Konigsberg, 2004; McKee, 2011; Seger, 2000). Villains are key to developing the main characters' storylines as long as they are precisely obstacles on the protagonists paths and opposing forces whose main aim is to prevent main characters from reaching their goals (Brenes, 2012; McBride, 2012).

When designing a villain, a series of physical characteristics guides the audience to easily identify them easily (Del Arcos, 2007; Ramadan, 2015). From a psychological perspective, in folk tales the

villain tends to be a bully disturbing peace and causing misfortune and harm (Propp, 2001). Meanwhile, in contemporary fictions, the villain's individual personality is shaped by both a reflective and dramatic level with the purpose of developing a character deploying psychological and moral nuances (Morrel, 2008; Sánchez-Casarrubios, 2013). The increasing problematization of representing villainy in current narratives redefines its role to become more nuanced and psychologically complex figures exploring their traumas, internal conflicts, and social circumstances (Barbini, 2019). The construction of villains is dominated by charisma, intelligence, and emotional vulnerability and linked to personality disorders in which narcissism is enhanced (Vidal-Mestre *et al.*, 2024). Therefore, current narratives have incorporated redemption arcs for villains, allowing for a deeper exploration of their internal motivations (Bergstrand & Jasper, 2018) and personal experiences (Sharmin & Sattar, 2018). In recent years, Disney has gone through a revisionist phase in the depiction of its villains by shifting its discursive construction towards humanization (Mollet, 2020).

As for the female role of the villain within the audiovisual, it is also presented away from its traditional construction, showing a resignification through her desires and motivations (Santos, 2017). Based on their physical construction, in Disney films, female villains contain marked features, angry expressions (scowls), frightening looks, dark clothing, characteristic laughter, or manifest stigmas (Monleón, 2022). From the psychological point of view, traditionally female villains have been represented with a symbolic load related to gender stereotypes and cultural or social norms that in current audiovisual productions has been redefined (Le Clue, 2017) to give them greater inner depth and disassociate them from classic roles such as the femme fatale or the witch (Le Clue & Vermaak-Griessel, 2022). In the *Once Upon a Time* series, the Wicked Queen reconfigures the myth of the wicked witch with psychological complexity and a tragic dimension that transcends the dichotomy between good and evil (Grausso, 2014). The Wicked Queen undergoes a significant evolution that oscillates between evil and a quest for redemption that defies traditional fairy tale villain conventions (Lombari, 2015). The series illustrates a progression in the portrayal of female villainy in contemporary fiction, moving beyond simple demonization to present her as more human (DeLong, 2015).

Finally, these structural changes make villains more believable, giving them the role of main characters in the plot and, consequently, making it easier for audiences to identify with them (Lavandier, 2003). This atypical situation now occurs frequently in the broadcasting industry, with audiences finally understanding villains in the time that it takes to tell a story (Davis, 2004). Going a step further, the transgressive nature of villains and their immorality make for a cathartic experience in that they do things that audiences would be best advised not to copy in real life and believably so, thus offering them the opportunity to connect with the evil that, according to Nietzsche (2012), forms part of the self (Martín, 2002). Nowadays, that intrinsic cold-heartedness prompts audiences to empathise more with the villain of a story than with its hero, for the former's personality traits are more dynamic than the latter's predictable morality and humanity (Sánchez-Casarrubios, 2013).

3. Methodology

In this qualitative-descriptive study, an exhaustive literature review was performed on two core themes: a character analysis from the perspective of both narratology and script theory. On the other hand, the literature on the concept of villainy was filtered to establish the characterisation and roles of this character, corresponding to the variables and values included in the analysis sheet (**Table 1**). Following this, the analytical sample was created. After viewing 155 episodes from the seven seasons of the series *Once Upon a Time*, the unit of analysis was selected, namely, the Evil Queen. This character appears in all the seasons, thus allowing to perform a more comprehensive study on villainy and its evolution.

In the third research stage, the analysis template was applied to the character of the Evil Queen. This data collection tool was specially designed for the study, not only borrowing and adapting the ideas of Casetti and Di Chio (2007), Chatman (1990), Greimas (1971) and Propp (2001), but also combining them with inclusive approaches, such as those of Egri (2004), Galán (2007) and Eder (2010b). The tool's most novel aspect is that it encompasses the characteristics and roles inherent to villains, thus making it replicable. In the case at hand, it facilitated the analysis of the physical and psychologi-

cal traits of the Evil Queen, in addition to her roles, including not only her relationship with other characters but also her arc of transformation. The combination of these three dimensions offers insights into the character's complexity and her role in the plot, as well as her transformation, involving the interaction of internal and external aspects. Finally, the symbolic dimension of the character of the villainess has been included, in addition to her socio-cultural connection, to open the opportunity for connection with the audience.

Table 1. Analysis sheet

Aspects	Evil Queen
General aspects. Physical traits Physiognomy/characteristic features Costume Make-up and hairstyle	*Season and episode*
Specific aspects of the villain. Physical traits Narcissistic	
General aspects. Psychological traits Behaviour Evolution	
Specific aspects of the villain. Psychological traits Does not shun confrontation Conceals her plans and actions Develops insightful intelligence Violates moral codes Erratic behaviour and a lack of coherence Cathartic	
General aspects. Behavioural traits Relationship with other characters Arc of transformation	
Specific aspects of the villain. Behavioural traits Destroys heroes Exploits others for her own benefit Ill will Existence of a past trauma Performs wicked deeds Specific aspects of the villain. Symbolism and social cultural connection	

Source: own elaboration on the basis of the literature discussed.

4. Results

Since the first season of this fiction series, the Evil Queen has been physically represented as the personification of evil with a perfect smile, dark eyes, and a defiant look, full lips with a birthmark on the right, and an expression of annoyance and concern. As to her costumes, they are usually dark in colour, including black and sober tones of red, green and grey. Reflecting her physical traits, the character reveals her narcissism during this first season. Just as the story is set in different places and times (in the present, in Storybrooke where the character is called Regina; and in the past, in the Enchanted Forest where she is known as the Evil Queen), so does her appearance.

For instance, in the present she has short, straight hair, whereas in the past it was longer and curlier –always worn up. The same can be said of her costumes, which in the present are more modest and formal, whereas in the past they were more vintage and flamboyant. But this is not always the case (Kitsis *et al.*, 2012), for when the Evil Queen is apparently in a more benevolent mood, her costumes are lighter in colour, she wears a more noble and melancholic expression, her gaze seems guileless and her hair is no longer worn up but down (**Figure 1**). As regards her psychological traits, during the first season, the Evil Queen has behaviour that corresponds to that of a round character whose complex dramatic development exacerbates her villainy, thus making her evolve dynamically.

Moving on to her behavioural traits, her relationship with other characters reveals the chinks in her armour, her weakest spot being maternity, a vulnerability that moderates her villainy on many occasions (Kitsis *et al.*, 2011). There is also the relationship with her parents. Whereas she has her father's unconditional support (1x02), her mother, the epitome of turpitude, hampers her efforts to abandon her wicked ways (1x18). Be that as it may, it is her failure to find love that really fuels her perverse behaviour (1x18).

Lastly, in the part of the story set in the present the character develops a flat arc of transformation because her personality does not change. Moreover, all the characteristics of the villain archetype relating to both her psychological and behavioural traits are palpable throughout the first season.

In the second season, the physical traits of the Evil Queen remain practically unchanged (**Figure 2**). With respect to the specific characteristics of the villain archetype, she loses the narcissism that she initially had because when she acts, she couldn't care less about her public image. As to her psychological traits, she is still a round character with a dynamic evolution. Moreover, the arrival of her mother in the Enchanted Forest thwarts her plans, making her a more complex and contradictory character (Goodman *et al.*, 2012). In relation to her villainous characteristics, during the season she retains them all, except for her intelligence because of her mother's influence (Espenson & Cheylov, 2013).

With regard to her behavioural traits, there is a change in her arc of transformation, which becomes more moderate thanks to her relationship with her mother and especially her son, sporadically abandoning her evildoing to retain that connection with the latter (Vazquez *et al.*, 2013). Another aspect that reflects this arc of transformation is her relationship with the heroine (Horowitz *et al.*, 2013), for the Evil Queen still possesses the specific characteristics of the villain archetype.

Figure 1. Physical traits of the Evil Queen in Season 1. *Once Upon a Time.*

Source: own elaboration from photographs of the television series.

Figure 2. Physical traits of the Evil Queen in Season 2. *Once Upon a Time.*

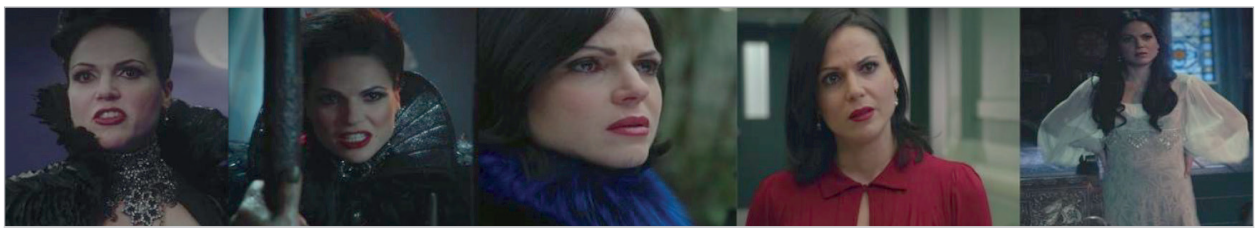Source: own elaboration from photographs of the television series.

In the third season, her physical traits remain unaltered insofar as she continues to behave like a villain. Nevertheless, she sometimes reveals her past goodness in her hairstyle and the style and colour of her costumes (**Figure 3**). Certain traits inherent to villainy disappear when she starts to act in a more principled way and to overcome past traumas and inner conflicts. She is less unpredictable, using her magic not only to cause harm but also to do good. Accordingly, she is still a round character with a dynamic evolution in this season. The doubts that she entertains about her plans make her act and walk the line between good and evil, a newly acquired sense of decency motivated by her behaviour.

The relationships that the Evil Queen develops in this season are determined by the fact that her arc of transformation is now circular. As in the previous seasons, the relationship with her son is the main reason why she continues to help others (Horowitz *et al.*, 2013). In addition, two new characters cross her path: her sister Zelena and a new love, Robin. The former, who assumes the role of their mother, embodies villainy in its purest form, eclipsing her own wickedness (Chambliss & Van Pables, 2014). On the contrary, Robin's influence makes her more sensitive and approachable (Vazquez & Egilsson, 2014). When their love affair ends (Chambliss *et al.*, 2014), she reverts to her wicked ways, thus developing a circular arc of transformation.

In the fourth season there are some sporadic changes in the Evil Queen's physical traits. In some episodes, her expression is more noble, good-natured, and anguished, and her costumes are more casual. Dark tones still prevail, while her hairstyle and make-up are similar to those in the previous seasons, although there are some isolated episodes in which her lipstick is softer and more natural (**Figure 4**). In reference to her psychological traits, they remain unchanged with respect to the third season, the two exemplifying her villainy best being her lack of fear of confrontation and her more astute scheming.

Lastly, her behaviour is more erratic, giving rise to a radical arc of transformation. Notwithstanding her suppressed enmity towards Emma, she becomes closer to her so as to understand her (Horowitz *et al.*, 2015). She also acts in the interests of the group with the aim of destroying the story's new principal villains (Goodman *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, her personality undergoes a profound transformation during the season, which is in sharp contrast with that at the beginning of the series. She is closest to her son, on the one hand, which makes her more kind-hearted and empathetic (Goodman *et al.*, 2014), and to Robin, on the other, which reflects her vulnerability and resignation because of her inability to find love (Horowitz *et al.*, 2014).

Figure 3. Physical traits of the Evil Queen in Season 3. *Once Upon a Time.*

Source: own elaboration from photographs of the television series.

Figure 4. Physical traits of the Evil Queen in Season 4. *Once Upon a Time.*
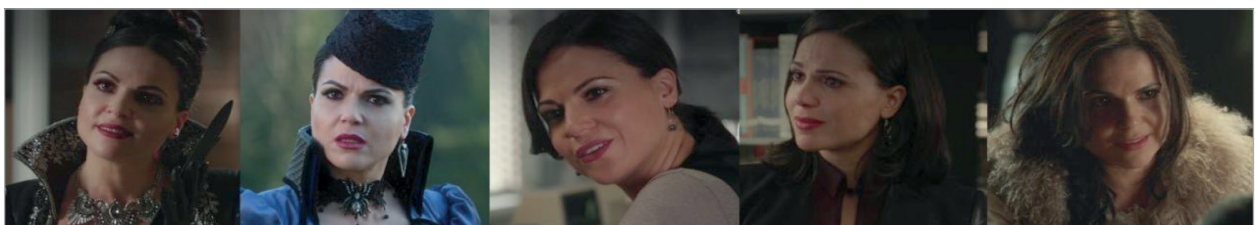
Source: own elaboration from photographs of the television series.

Figure 5. Physical traits of the Evil Queen in Season 5. *Once Upon a Time.*

Source: own elaboration from photographs of the television series.

Figure 6. Physical traits of the Evil Queen in Season 6. *Once Upon a Time.*

Source: own elaboration from photographs of the television series.

The fifth season marks an important turning point in the development of the Evil Queen as a villain. The physical traits that she occasionally displayed in the previous season become more firmly entrenched. Besides wearing her hair down and more natural make-up, she now alternates the hitherto predominantly dark costumes with lighter ones (**Figure 5**). As to her psychological traits, they no longer include those inherent to the villain because that role has now been assumed by new characters. In addition, she acts as a saviour and begins to believe that she can turn over a new leaf (Goodman *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, she is again a round character with a dynamic evolution.

In relation to her behaviour, she mends fences that have been torn apart by her odious behaviour. For example, she apologises to her father (Kitsis et al., 2016), makes up with her sister (Goodman et al., 2016) and buries the hatchet with Emma (Goodman et al., 2016). She also finds the love for which she has yearned with Robin (Chambliss et al., 2015), only for her happiness to be cut short by his death (Schwartz & Powell, 2016). All these relationships imply that her arc of transformation is traumatic, for she is now a different person. To this should be added that she has finally managed to eliminate all evil from her persona.

In the sixth season, the Evil Queen behaves just as wickedly as she did at the beginning of the series,

recovering her former physical and psychological traits, which results in a dynamic evolution (**Figure 6**). In short, she looks, thinks and acts like a villain. Lastly, the connection with the greatest influence on her is maternity, for thanks to the love of her son Henry she ultimately manages to mend her wicked ways (Kitsis *et al.*, 2017). Her relationship with Robin is also important, for she brings him back to life with her magic (Kitsis *et al.*, 2016), although he is not the same person (Kitsis *et al.*, 2017). This enables her to find happiness without true love (Goodman *et al.*, 2017), all of which implies that her arc of transformation is radical insofar as her personality has undergone a momentous change.

To end with, in the seventh season, the Evil Queen, after eliminating the villainous side of her personality, becomes a reformed character full of goodness. Despite the fact that part of the season is set in a different place, implying that the character assumes a different role (Espenson *et al.*, 2017), she ends up becoming her old self, recovering her memories (Espenson *et al.*, 2017). For this reason, her physical, psychological, and behavioural traits are similar to the ones that she displayed in the fifth season (**Figure 7**). The only difference is that her arc of transformation is flat, owing to the fact that throughout the season, she acts like a heroine, without portraying any of the characteristics of the villain archetype. It warrants noting that her old enemies are now kindly disposed towards her,
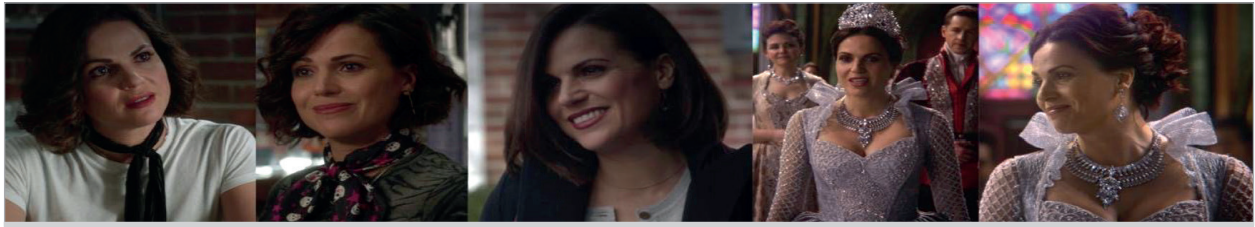
Source: own elaboration from photographs of the television series.

showing that it is possible to change and to be happy by doing good deeds (Kitsis *et al.*, 2018).

As a final reflection, the character's physical traits have changed in accordance with her villainy. When acting with evil intent, these are marked by a specific facial expression and body language, but as she becomes less villainous, these are replaced by new ones more in keeping with goodness. As to her psychological traits, she is a round character with a dynamic evolution throughout the series, her behaviour being influenced by her different emotional ties –maternity, love, enmity and sisterhood– and mirrored by her different arcs of transformation that represent her long and arduous journey towards final redemption: flat (Seasons 1 and 7), moderate (Season 2), circular (Season 3), radical (Seasons 4 and 6) and traumatic (Season 5). During the healing process, moreover, the characteristics of the villain archetype have been progressively eliminated season after season, until disappearing completely.

To conclude, the results collected from the analysis, in relation to its symbolic dimension, The Evil Queen walks through the moral, affective, and cultural tensions present in the contemporary imaginary. Her evolution throughout fiction goes beyond representing the villain of the story as she becomes an allegorical figure of the conflict between inner good and evil, the search for redemption, and the fight for female freedom. The Evil Queen represents the struggle against the inner shadow and psychological complexity of humanity. In addition, her bond with Henry symbolizes contemporary motherhood from a revisionist perspective, where non-biological affective bonds are imposed when it comes to being a mother.

On the one hand, it responds to the representation of three-dimensional female characters with their own story and a capacity for transformation. On the other hand, her personal story –marked by demand, loss, and manipulation– presents a vulnerable woman who tries to break with the past through resilience and emotional rehabilitation. For this reason, the redemption of the Evil Queen resembles socio-cultural values that are imposed today, such as self-criticism, personal change, and forgiveness.

5. Conclusion

In view of the results of the content analysis and discussion, we can confirm the research hypothesis: the series *Once Upon a Time* deconstructs the figure of the traditional villain through a physical and psychological transformation in accordance with the fundamental premise of the series. This is evidenced by the radical arc of transformation of the Evil Queen, the object of study here, and by both her physical –the evolution of her costumes, makeup, and hairstyle– and psychological traits, portrayed through the construction of a round character with a dynamic evolution throughout the series.

The development of the Evil Queen, who progressively abandons her evil ways to become a reformed character, is thus justified. This deconstruction allowed the creators to present her as a real, multifaceted person, far removed from her origins, namely, fairy tales and myths, which feature flat character archetypes, thus making it easier for audiences to identify with her.

Additionally, this transformation goes hand in hand with a happy ending that differs from those of myths and even fairy tales. This is down to the fact that the creators wanted to engage children and teenagers, which is clear in the message of the series: fresh hope and second chances. As has been seen in our study, this is reflected in the central theme of the series' storylines, which revolves around the idea

that the wickedness of the Evil Queen serves as a catharsis for the character who finally discovers what she needs to be happy.

Finally, the Evil Queen is a character that functions simultaneously as a symbol of moral transformation, female empowerment, deconstruction of the archetype of the villain, and as a socio-cultural reflection of a society that prioritizes psychological complexity and reconciliation between past and present. Her figure is the mirror of a world where good and evil coexist in constant tension, and where identity is built between ruptures, decisions and new beginnings.

Notes

1.   1. In Latin America, Once Upon a Time was initially broadcast on television channels such as ABC, and later on channels like Disney Channel and Disney XD, where it attracted a large audience, especially among young and family viewers. Currently, the series can be watched in Latin America on Disney+.

2.   "La exigencia de estudiar los productos televisivos en relación con los procesos culturales que marcan el ritmo de la vida social" (Casetti & Di Chio, 1999, p. 293), translated by the authors.

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