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# Wicked Stepmothers: The Tale of Snow White

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*Wicked Stepmothers: A Tale of Snow White*

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## Introduction

Once upon a time, the Grimm Brothers captured the history, culture, and character mentality of stories traditionally told through spoken word by placing these tales on the page. The Grimm Brothers reinvented classics by modifying the tales they collected to fit their romantic era audience, just as Walt Disney tried to encapsulate a century later with American ideals and animation. His vision made “Snow White” a global phenomenon that made audiences escape their lives and project their issues onto the narrative. Despite repeating the same tale, the conflict in the story remains in the tension between the villainous stepmother and the heroine daughter. The stepparent-child relationship has become iconic in pop-culture as it simply outlines the forces of good and evil, with the child trying to escape the abusive parent.

The Grimm Brothers repurposed the tales to appeal to an audience that saw stepmother capable of evil over biological parents, helping the evil stepmother cliché thrive in other tales like “Hansel and Gretel” and “Juniper Tree.” The static character development of the evil queen trope proceeds to leave a dark impression in every retelling of “Snow White” and continues to contribute to a society that perpetuates the stigmatization of stepmothers based on female stereotypes. In the Grimm Brothers and Disney’s versions of “Snow White,” the tale spreads ideologies significant to the culture and history of the storyteller and their views on morality. Their versions address how abuse resonates and develops with a contemporary tale like *Fairest of All* chronicling the Queen’s descent into this dark role while Snow contrasts her decisions, her actions, and her fate.

## **History of the Oral Tradition: How Snow White became a Written Text**

The evolution of technology launched “Snow White” from the oral tradition to an era of mass production where the origins of printed tales began to create a singular narrative that encapsulated the values of the audience. Prior to the Grimms’ collection, storytellers whose duty to the community was to embellish and reenact tales. Yet with the recent advances, technology has reduced folklorists’ positions and highlighted artists who could mass-produce one specific narrative. Folktales once signified the power associated with social status. Under a monolithic tradition, literature acted as a pedagogical tool taught the dominant society’s values once the oral tradition faded, with scholars calling it “the “Gutenberg Galaxy,” which brought about individualism, Protestantism, nationalism... not to mention the purely modern idea that to be illiterate is to be ignorant” (Rahmat 64). Technology like the printing press revolutionized society and privatized the tradition. Soon power rested with those who could afford books and those literate enough to read them. By nourishing audiences’ love of traditional storytelling through the evolution of technology, “Snow White” could maintain its relevancy.

The evolution of media introduced a grand social change where people developed literacy skills through folklore; however, the consequence of printing these tales was that the power of literature rested with the wealthier classes. Although, attracted to the mechanics of language and the allure of the relationship between the sign, signified, and its signifier, those who control the medium also control the message. By practicing on the same books that fixated on royalty, audiences become familiarized with the aristocracy at the center of these tales rather than the folk. Printing became a tool to educate the masses on the mechanics of language but also the societal expectations that the aristocracy valued, as “the medium itself is the message, as we are being shaped by the tool we created” (Rahmat, 64). The power of the printing press parallels the

internet in the digital age. Both are a fast stream of information used by a growing audience that tries to sell and convince their readers that their version of the story is true. For “Snow White,” this meant adapting to the times by reinventing itself and marketing it alongside technology. Reflecting the accomplishments made through technology, the Disney Corporation is the most successful at technological innovation as exemplified through its feature-length film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the momentum of the printing press transformed mass production and, with this power, publishers dictated the subject and style stories presented the main character. Influenced by the values and attitudes of the aristocracy, children and willing adults learned to accept the upper classes as the center focus of these tales. Soon the nobility used their influence to popularize literature:

The genre of the literary fairy tale was institutionalized as an esthetic and social means through which questions and issues of civilité, proper behavior and demeanor in all types of situations, were mapped out as narrative strategies for literary socialization, and in many cases, a symbolic gesture of subversion to question the ruling standards of taste and behavior (Zipes, “Breaking the Disney Spell” 334).

They wanted the characters in their tales to model their views of ideal behavior and by extension teach their audience these values. By harnessing the power of the printing press, writers could produce their version of the story quicker and, in turn, they became the ones who promoted notions of social hierarchy and elitism.

Similarly, Disney and co-animators introduced American expectations of women and impressions of femininity to the discourse. Animators imagined the voice, appearance, and demeanor of Snow and the Queen. However, Disney received credit for the film due to his



funding, company trademark, and the insertion of his name within the title. From the collaboration of talented artists that Walt Disney gathered, audiences recognize him as the owner of the reimagined “Snow White.” Following a discourse that expected heroines to be particularly young and at the threshold of adulthood, their choices and consequences shaped the character’s development. Casting princess and princesses as the main character, Disney added to the idea that the elite were capable of making pure hearted decisions. Disney animation contributed to the evolution of technology by shaping Snow White’s claim to aristocratic lineage based upon a cultural expectation that royalty should model society’s idealized behavior through looks as well as demeanor.

In the canonization of Grimms’ fairy tales, the brothers legitimized their place in the world by romanticizing folk and conforming to the standards of high society. They took folk culture and reintroduced it to the higher classes despite folk being traditionally “identified with the illiterate in a literate society and thus the folk as a concept was identified exclusively with the vulgar and the uneducated,” (Bronnorr 57). By changing the presentation of the story, fairy tales became less derogatory and more a part of reputable society, just as Disney did by reinventing the tale and marketing to mass audiences literate or not. Substituting the heart of folk, the Grimms’ process intended to preserve the form:

In fact, their major accomplishment in publishing their two volumes of 156 tales altogether in 1812 and 1815 was to create an ideal type for the literary fairy tale, one that sought to be as close to the oral tradition as possible, while incorporating stylistic, formal, and substantial thematic changes to appeal to a growing middle-class audience. What concerned them most was to create a facsimile in High German of the folk manner and tone of storytelling. (Zipes, “Enchanted Forest” 31-32)

Ultimately, their idealism uprooted the tradition and fans of folklore would miss the rare opportunity to hear a speaker express a story with such intonation, diction, and detail ever again. Disney's premise has furthered this dilemma, as the film has trademarked the style and sound of attributed to "Snow White's" characters.

Canonization, the inauguration of a text into a prestigious literary circle favors ownership of tales as adults undertake the storyteller role today. However, popular versions limit or predetermine the script storytellers use. Seen as the truest form of the tales, the printed copy takes power away from the storyteller who once could claim their narrative to be one of many singular true accounts. "Snow White" has transformed from open text and interpretation to a closed analysis, narrowed furthered by Disney's vision. Despite the multitude of "Snow White" stories in publication today, audiences prioritize some tales over others. Culture has fashioned a hierarchal system that ranks these tales based upon the number of people exposed to the rendition and the mode in which the author executes the idea. Replaced by the memories of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, fans of Grimms' "Snow White" dwindle as fans forget a written text proceeds the movie.

Borrowing inspiration from folklorists, the Grimm Brothers' helped revolutionize storytelling by encouraging audiences to read tales familiar with their heritage. Once published, the Grimms' canonized their tales at the sacrifice of disregarding the oral tradition, making the form antiquated. Although, artists inspired by "Snow White" continue to reconstruct ideas where they pay tribute to former literary methods or prior words that informed their version. The cost of this exchange is the shift in power the newer rendition receives. The history of the oral tradition shows how canonization through technology informs the public to prioritize one rendition over another, ironically undermining the function of the oral tradition.

## **Romantic Era's Influence**

Ideologies, a collection of ideas that reflect the beliefs of a society, construct audiences understanding and perception of “Snow White’s” characters and plot. Under an influx of ideas, the values of artists changed from reason based texts to a Romantic movement that embraced individualism, nature, imagination, innocence, independence, nationalism, and religion. The Romantic discourse and ideological perspective influenced the public’s reception to the collection and the brothers themselves. Grimms’ linguistic project of collecting folktales distinguished itself from fantasy writers, as their goal was to share in the history that folk possessed. Their romanticism touched and reflected upon the nation’s heritage:

In their nations cultural heritage they searched for a time when man (kind) had still lived in unity with God and nature. When they spoke about the child, they usually thought of it not so much in realistic terms as a potential reading audience, but rather as a symbol of innocence, purity, and naïveté, which correspond to their concept of the "childhood" of the nation (Kamenetsky, “The Brothers Grimm: Folktale Style and Romantic Theories,” 381)

The characteristics of romanticism influenced the implementation of gender roles, as Snow retains her innocence through the dangerous adult world around her. Explained and established in the aforementioned list, the brothers channeled their Romantic philosophy into an outlet of tales so audiences could admire and embrace these new values.

In the Grimms’ intake on nature as a means to connect to God, romanticism lead the brothers’ to construct a character that could reinforce the nobility’s relationship with divine authority. In relation to women, they sought a feminine lead that had a deep relationship with nature, yet the story still revolved the privileges of her royal lineage. By establishing the main

character's clear connection to nature, (i.e. Snow's kindness to animals,) her actions became evidence of her divine authority and relationship to God. Nature manifested itself in the physical and mental disposition of the character with these traits used to distinguish good from evil. For instance, Snow's triumph over a masculine agency, as manifested in the Queen's personality, is due to her innate goodness.

Under the Romantic perspective, this discourse explains how one can associate Snow's life and the manner of her death with Christian symbols. The importance of nature can also be found in the story structure, as a scholar states that "distinctive formalistic elements that provide the unique pattern of Snow White are seen in the heroine's expulsion from home, the various threats on her life culminating with apparent death, and her rescue and reawakening" (Stone 56). Continuing to chronicle the heroine's journey through religious symbolism, Snow leaves home and undergoes death and rebirth that distinctively parallels Jesus Christ's own tale of persecution and revival. Snow becomes an allegory of Christ with the absent King representing the Holy Father's missing influence. Both, God and the King become figures that occupy a central, yet invisible, position in the protagonists' lives (Norton, "Snow White" 76). In their absence, evil forces like the Queen take control of the kingdom. To restore peace it is the offspring of these powerful masculine figures that challenge corrupt rulers. Even Snow's father exists in an inactive state of interference, as he is neither absent nor overwhelmed by the Grimms' Queen. Briefly mentioned in the beginning, he fails to return at any other point in the story nor serves any other purpose than to create Snow.

*Fairest of All*, the contemporary version uses Christian undertones of God, rebirth, and power to represent issues of dependency and social collapse. In Valentino's novel, the noble King dies and leaves behind the Queen to rule in his place. Concerned with depicting how

flawed people cope with the loss of love, social structure, and emotional support the King provides the Queen enters a downward spiral. If the King is a manifestation of God then his death in *Fairest of All* supports the breakdown of humanity and the Queen's descent into darkness, as mirrored by her depression. In this analogy, Snow becomes the Renaissance that pulls civilization out of the Dark Ages. Since society does not accept extreme upward mobility unless earned through hard work, the King's gift is Snow's claim to aristocratic lineage, with the text reinforcing her ability to marry a foreign prince.

Influenced by religion and philosophies, these foundations inadvertently crept into the collection and imposed notions of traditional gender roles and social hierarchy. Neo-Platonic philosophers whose theory of the Great Chain of Being, known as the *Scala Naturae* or Ladder of Life, outlined the hierarchical structure of where humans ranked in relation to God. This background further influenced artists' perception of romanticism as royalty's relationship with nature parallel their relationship with God. This bond signifies the King and Queen's worthiness through this characterization. Heavily drawing upon the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, romantics inherited the *Scala Naturae*, placing importance upon how nature reflects God. (Quinney 412) Ranked higher than commoners, kings and queens in "Snow White" and European society enforced the subject position of the *Scala Naturae* hierarchy. Although caste systems like monarchies seem to be non-existent in the US, the class system comes to reinforce social order. Reliance, hard work, ambition, and determination make the class system more flexible. These key characteristics Walt Disney emulated and cherished, he convincingly composed in Snow as she stays at the dwarfs' cabin in exchange for traditional female housework.

To compare and contrast religious influence, the brothers' version of "Snow White" leaned towards the Old Testament's belief in corporal punishment as the correct course of action for its villains, while Disney favored the New Testament's approach through redemption. In the original "Snow White," the prince forces the Queen to dance to her death in hot iron shoes as her punishment ("Snow White" 89). For the brothers, their version is more adamant about royalty acting on behalf of God, channeling divine intervention and serving as His representative body, as seen with Snow paralleling Christ. Conversely, she plunges off a cliff edge as a single bolt of lightning strikes the ground, demonstrating how nature and convince collaborate to kill the Queen (Hollis 61). Again when God reappears in the casket scene, Snow lies dead in her coffin as a beam of light cuts through the trees and shines down upon her lone image when the prince stumbles across her grave (Hollis, 62). Even *Fairest of All* focuses on redemption in a more lighthearted resolution as Snow forgives the Queen (Valentino 250). The idea of God representing nature echoes in the lightning and sunlight, as two different sides of God, display His direct authority. In spite of the King's absence from the text, the Holy Father appears in his place through these acts of nature.

In both Old and New Testament interpretations, the symbolic red apple links the Grimms and Disney's stories to Christianity, innocence, and nature. The iconic red apple signals to the audiences the hidden themes within the text. The significance of the apple in Christianity dates back to the Garden of Eden as a paradise corrupted by disobedience and forbidden knowledge. When Eve bites from the apple and convinces Adam to follow, she severs humanity's immediate connection to God. The fall from Eden represents the Queen's monarchy that poisons the community. Eve's decision and her persuasion of Adam to pursue the same course of action results in their expulsion. Intending to invoke a scene of discord in the world, the heroine

becomes susceptible to the evil queen's deception. The Queen's innate malevolence and persuasion become the final piece that kills pure, naive Snow White, and resurrecting her as the redeemer.

In the Grimms' efforts to impose gender roles based off their religious beliefs, the stepmother becomes a sinister figure who uses dark magic to establish power and control. In retaining their ideas and audience, she represents the forbidden knowledge banned by God in the garden. After undergoing several revisions, their writing has led them to success by contributing the notion of motherhood, marriage, and submissiveness to the female subject position. Manifesting strict rules about gender, the development of Snow White's femininity contrasts the Queen's masculine personality. Using the mysterious nature of the woods as a transformative place, Snow reaches maturation and independence from a controlling figure, while retaining her childlike innocence.

The tale illustrates the Queen in contrast to the wholesome symbol Snow represents, as comes to unravel her own reputation and authority. Dramatized, as an unnatural beauty that reigns with an absent king her Lady Macbeth-like ambition, ferocious temper, and amoral methods become a terrifying combination. Personality aside, the way in which the Queen relates to Snow lends itself to strain, as the foundation of a stepmother's position has always been one of vulnerability and conflict. In terms of a stepmother's restrictions within a new family, the patriarchal structure defines the standards set in the household, level of authority, and amount of involvement that doesn't overstep the boundaries set up by prior figures. In cases where the father take a less authoritative approach, the stepmother compensates by disciplining the child. Occupying a space difficult to navigate and unsure of her authority stepmothers seem aggressive, because society vilifies them for overstepping their boundaries.

Discovering the Grimms' multiple revisions old manuscripts reveal the evolution of the stepmother character. The brothers' originally planned for the Queen to be the natural birth mother, however, they deemed this relationship inappropriate. They did not want to associate mothers with abuse since it seemed unnatural for women to be cruel enough to reject to her own child. After several adjustments, they agreed upon the 1857 version, in which the mother dies and the evil stepmother replaces her place within the family (Dégh 69). Critical of female gender roles, the 1812 edition changed the nature of the stepparent-child relationship and placed accountability on a figure whose connection to the child was one of marriage. The issue of a mother characterized as abusive disconnects the reader from the text. It's a difficult task for audiences to disassociate the methods of their parental role with the one projected in the story. The Grimms' version of Snow White establishes how audiences viewed the stepparent role females portray in and outside fiction. In order to idealize the German tradition of folklore and implement Christian themes, they added their own twist by de-romanticizing stepmother-hood by denoting them as suspicious and incapable of loving the stepchild like their own.



## **Gender, Power, and Politics**

“Snow White’s” cultural, social, and religious influences affect the portrayal of female agency and the methodology that women use to secure their power in a politicized world that places men in positions of absolute authority. The tale illustrates gender politics through the evil stepmother trope with the Queen’s social limitations dependent upon society’s belief that some people are inherently evil. By extension, children receive their evil identity from their parents, with stepsiblings being equally abusive as the stepmother. The Grimms’ portray the female balance of power by characterizing women with a Madonna complex, where they are either associated with the Virgin Mary or in steep contrast labeled promiscuous. Society vilifies the Queen, labeling her the latter since her royal position was dependent upon marriage. Suspected of enchanting the King through her sexuality and marriage to secure her power depicts the criticism of the only agency women possess. Returning to the Madonna Complex, women are shamed for living outside the rigid boundaries of female sexuality, using the only influence they have to enter a male dominated space.

Under the myth that stepmothers have a greater capacity for child abuse, their quick marriages, and lack of emotional connection contributes to the evil stepmother stereotype. Statistically speaking, men are more likely to abandon, abuse, or neglect a child if he suspects the child is not his own. Furthermore, evolutionary theory hypothesizes that in situations where genetic relatedness is low or suspect; stepchildren are more likely to be abused by parents (Lightcap 62). Yet this is true for any in-group out-group scenario, where people intentionally ignore others in distress, as proven with the bystander effect. Whether or not myths depict stepmothers as villains, it represents the cultural beliefs of the authors and the society who upholds these dangerous and misinformed ideas.

Gender roles enforce the unequal distribution of power in the “Snow White” text as the Queen’s position highlights expectations of female immorality and sin. When the Queen enters the woods she physically transforms herself into the witch typecast. She lusts after her royal position, maintains pride in her appearance, and envy in Snow’s budding beauty. The more Snow matures increases her chances of attracting potential suitors who would take away the Queen’s control. Without the power behind her position, the Queen would become weak and vulnerable to the man that would claim the throne and make her subservient to his will. From this inevitability, the Queen rationalizes her greedy stance on power and evokes her wrath on Snow by chasing her out of the kingdom and as a last resort a secret execution.

In terms of genetic relatedness, biological connection, the Grimms’ transform the mother into the stepmother to avoid passing on the evil gene that would resonate in the offspring. To balance out the Queen’s evil, Snow must become an incarnation of the angel in the house, Virginia Woolf most feared in her essay the “Professions of Women.” Providing proof of internal goodness, the Grimms contribute to the protagonist’s disassociation from the stepparent. Genetic relatedness must be removed since “inherent” genes factor into audiences’ expectations of the character’s development, as readers believed children carry this evil gene. Kin altruism, family selflessness, also highlights risk and reward of parent-child relationships, as scientists believe, “individuals are more likely to sacrifice for close kin than for distant kin and least likely to do so for unrelated individuals” (Burnstein, 547). A prime example resides in “Cinderella,” whose stepsisters’ cruelty matches the stepmother’s abusive behavior. For Snow White and other Grimm tales alike, the stepmother is consistently villain-ized because she has no genetic relation to the stepchild. Grimm therefore argues the Queen’s questionable loyalty increases her chances of abusive behavior.

Enveloped by the false pretense of immediate devotion, the dynamics, function, and symbolism of stepmothers are undermined by stereotypes about motherhood. Society forgets relationships require a learning process where family members need to grow into their roles, especially members of stepfamilies. Often, women are judged if they do not provide proof of maternal instincts, as “nothing is more important than the impact of parents and others who take care of the child; second in importance is our cultural heritage, when transmitted to the child in the right manner” (Bettelheim, 269). Even birth mothers, process their relationship through a nine-month period of bonding with their baby not including the months of aftercare. Operating off the notion that all virtuous women possess a mothering instinct, the Grimms confuse the transitions of stepmother to biological mothers.

In realm of strict gender role, motherhood and marriage signify the only purpose women serve. In women’s limited positions, the evil stepmothers of fairy tales typically undergo a quick courtship that provides little to no time to build a strong and healthy relationship with the child. In other cases, stepmothers worry about the prospects of their own children and push the stepchild aside to gain favor with the husband. The myth of instant love poisons female relationships and stigmatizes stepmothers based on unrealistic social expectations (Dainton, 94). In the Queen’s case, society’s condemns her character based on female stereotypes that impose the idea that motherhood as the only duty and sole source of happiness for women. To combat these myths, schools and society could normalize the stepmother role by sending a message through books, movies, and media that portray true relationships of stepmothers and generally women overall.

### **Abusive Stepmothers Three: In “Snow White,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and “Juniper Tree”**

Remembered for impressing upon audiences the image of the wicked stepmother in several of Grimms original tales indicate they replaced the biological mother with a stepmother to reinforce the belief that stepmothers are more likely to be inherently cruel. This structural change highlight Grimms notion that questioning the stepmother’s loyalty to the family is more preferred than writing the story of an evil mother. Since the stepparent-child relationship is bound by marriage rather than biological factors, the exaggerated form of maternal malice demonstrates stepmothers vulnerability in comparison to the cases depicted in “Snow White,” “Hansel and Gretel,” and the “Juniper Tree.” These tales provide a variety of evil stepmother types that projects an overbearing matriarch whose ill deeds must be punished by death. Portraying violence as the only solution, the Grimms begin the indoctrination of readers accepting the stepmother’s violent fate. In a sense, the Queen’s fierce downfall suffices as her atonement with an eye for an eye approach. Only in the 1882 collection of Portuguese folk tales does the princess forgive the Queen for her abuse yet the stepmother in this version is of the prince. (“The Vain Queen” 6). In exploring Grimms’ collection, the evil stepmother trope is not isolated to “Snow White” but acts as reoccurring theme in the traditional folktale structure.

In comparison to “Hansel and Gretel’s” wicked stepmother, the audience carries the belief that the women are solely responsible for the mismanagement of the house with chaos in reality paralleled in a magical space that explores the stepparent-child relationship. The forest in both tales is symbolic of the children’s perceptions about the mother figure whose true nature becomes magnified by the exaggeration of her features and evil personality. In continuing to marginalize the women, “Hansel and Gretel” and “Snow White” deflect their problems on this fantasy to help them navigate their abusive home lives. Within the woods, Hansel and Gretel

undergo starvation and hear their parents' plan to abandon them for their own sake of survival. Based on culturally expectations, society anticipates parents to address the children's needs by sacrificing their own. This image is inverted in the fantasy world to show how egotistic the parents are and to highlight "a child's real anxieties about starvation, abandonment, and being devoured by enacting a drama in which children are perpetually at risk" (Norton, "Hansel and Gretel" 181). Once lost in the woods, the children lament their situation, meet the witch, and vanquish her through her own glutinous desire. Their imagination and interpretation help project a story that aligns with their reasoning and logic. The reality of the mother deciding to abandon the children turns to denial on their part, as this reality does not fit into their idea of what a mother should represent. Overwhelmed by their predicament the children make her the witch.

The female figures in "Hansel and Gretel" and "Snow White" transform to signify an undiluted character that is the antithesis of the idealized mother. The woods strip the stepmother of her enchanting appearance, becoming a murderous witch that takes life from what the mother creates. Her transformation signal an obsession to consume the children's power through cannibalism, just as the Queen commanded the Huntsman to carve out Snow's lungs and liver (Grimm, "Snow White" 84). Both women from "Hansel and Gretel" and "Snow White" seek to gorge on the children because of their power and youth. The children prevent the mother from maintaining control as they threaten her survival. The witch figure trickles down to a selfish mother, unredeemable because of her inability to be as self-sacrificing as the birthmother. Although the biological mother dies in almost every case it brings the protagonists into the world and she is later repurpose as the spiritual guiding figure. For the stepmother, she involuntarily fulfills the same role with her death, as the protagonist is coronated the on to the next stage of life.

In reinforcing stereotypes about stepmothers, “Hansel and Gretel” adds to the belief that the forest contributes to the reappearance of the Queen in her opaquely immoral form and the protagonists’ psychological confrontation with living in a lawless world. The stepmother’s rejection from the home and the child’s transition to the untamed woods “is a common symbol for the human being’s loss or abandonment of previous values and securities. Dante starts his *Divina Commedia* with: Just in the middle of my life’s endeavors, I found myself deep in a darkened forest because the correct path had been forgotten” (Heuscher, 117). If the child-parent relationship becomes tainted, then the protagonists’ must remove themselves from home, as a social worker would do in modern times. However, there is no government agency to intervene in child protection. Instead, it is through divine authority that the children must rely on themselves to survive abuse.

The forest creates a mirror image of the sins the parents represent and the children’s moral journey that leads and tempts them down the same gluttonous path. Snow, Hansel, and Gretel’s become the adults who provide readers a solution to the temptations of adulthood. Hansel and Gretel symbolically destroy the house they were seeking to satisfy their hunger and act as retribution for their parents’ desertion to fulfill these same needs. The witch reflects the parents’ moral misguidance and the children eliminate her to restore balance. In Snow’s case, she falls prey to the Queen’s tokens of female adulthood and obsession with beauty as she nearly dies from a staylace for a corset, a comb, and the apple of knowledge (Grimm, “Snow White” 86-87). These three items, including the mirror, foreshadow how vanity can be a deadly sin, which is exactly what the Queen embodies. The faults of adults in both tales become paralleled in the dangerous tasks the children must overcome, if not they reach a conclusion where they die from failing to fight their abusers.

Along with “Hansel and Gretel,” folktales like “Snow White” display lenient expectations and attitudes of men, whereas women are more scrutinized for their social position. For instance, Hansel and Gretel forgive their father despite his compliance with the stepmother’s crime of desertion and child abuse. The Grimms characterize the father as a regretful figure that acts out of coercion to the stepmother’s dominating will:

A derelict father is not only showered with diamonds, but is also awarded a more pliable replacement for the spouse who had tyrannized him. Not one, but two witches have been expunged from the narrative: the gluttonous child-devourer who fattened Hans and the bread-denying childstarver whom Grimm had alternately presented as the children's biological mother and as their stepmother. (Knoepfmacher 1)

Similar to Adam in the fall from Eden, he is often interpreted as a casualty, punished as collateral for Eve’s disobedience to an all-powerful being. Utilizing the delicate position of women, “Hansel and Gretel” also criticize women for their inability to provide, yet when the story was first recorded “history reveals that the children’s cruel stepmother was, in fact, a creation of Wilhelm Grimm’s fantasy. The tale, as the brothers first heard it, featured a biological mother who conspires with her husband to abandon the children” (Norton, “Hansel & Gretel” 180). Falsifying the source of the abuse further emphasizes the stepmothers stereotype. Today, with the help of Grimms’ revisions, audiences are unaware of the original Queen’s malice and absent maternal nature.

Besides “Hansel and Gretel,” “Juniper Tree” parallels the original Queen’s inherent cruelty and lack of familial allegiance that is now split between the mother and the “other” mother. Devoid of any motherly love, the “Juniper Tree’s” stepmother does not transform into a witch because she is so opaquely and inherently evil that there is no need to transform. She

presents true self without a disguise and controls through emotional manipulation. The stepmother succeeds in killing the stepson for no explicit reason than genuine dislike and serving the boy for dinner to the whole family for unknown vengeance (Grimm, “Juniper Tree” 192). The definitive detail that distinguishes this tale from “Snow White” is the stepmother’s ability to be cruel to even her own daughter. “Juniper Tree” describes how the stepmother psychologically torments her daughter by convincing her she is guilty of killing the stepson (Grimm, “Juniper Tree” 192). Surprisingly, the same pure evil characterization is true in the first “Snow White”:

The earliest known text is in a manuscript of 1810, sent to Clemens Brentano but never published. Here the handsome queen is the girls’ natural mother, who first wishes for her and is then dismayed by her ever-increasing beauty. It is the mother herself who takes Snow White to the forest on the pretext of picking flowers and abandons her there...

Snow White’s father who finds and removes the coffin, and then orders his royal physicians to revive her... after this surprising climax, we find the familiar marriage to a prince and the queen’s dance of death in the heated iron shoes... first published edition of 1812 the natural mother is still the villain. (Stone, 57)

Upon rewrite, the stepmother replaces the birth mother in her transgressions because the authors envisioned cruelty and motherhood as two separate traits. In addition, the Grimms have not been acquainted with the modernist discourse that refutes this belief and places responsibility on the individual.



### **The Discourse of Disney's Snow White**

The empire Walt Disney created through *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* revolutionized storytelling by gaining the attention of mass audiences and projecting a fantasy that encompassed social issues. Disney's film tried to compensate for 20th century America's lack of basic human rights through innovative technology that operated as a mental escape from their harrowing lives. Childhood and leisure time did not exist for the working class and child-laborers as they spent most of their days in factories. Furthermore, the public's overall morale and innocence were lost during the emergence of World War I and the Great Depression. When Walt Disney risked bankruptcy to produce *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, he created an escape for the disenchanted public. WWI and the fall of the roaring twenties brought the realization, to all classes, that starving alone in the woods was not far off from their reality. For those who were poor, they saw Disney's film as the potential of reaching wealth again and a return to American aristocracy.

The film also reinforced patriarchal ideals that catered to fragile masculine egos, hurt by their inability to change their situation, boost men's self-esteem. In depicting Snow as a damsel in distress, audiences could project themselves as the brave, handsome, and wealthy prince who possessed a meaningful place in society by functioning as the hero. Deprived of a playful childhood, freedom, and a responsible labor system audiences fell in love with Disney's fabricated world. Production of movies like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* portrayed childhood innocence and resiliency against corrupt, cruel figures. The movie projected the ideal life that the depressed public could temporary escape through, as it was a projection of their desires.

In a time of international despair the American public latched onto Disney's "Snow White" because it acted as a series of coping mechanisms that allowed viewers to escape reality

by displacing their desires and fears into a fantasy narrative that temporarily alleviated their stress. Disney's rebranding of "Snow White" became magnetic for disillusioned audiences that were engrossed by its availability to all social classes and cultures. By creating this fixed narrative, Disney controlled the medium and produced full-featured animated films that captivated audiences who could barely speak English. After witnessing his narrative for a relatively cheap price, his story ingrained this single narrative into the discourse. Once reproduced, future storytellers retold "Snow White" through their own interpretations by paying homage to Disney's movie instead of Grimms' printed text. Audiences today continue to watch Disney movies, where the film subtly addresses issues that guidance target audiences through emotional crises.

Despite Grimms' writing "Snow White" with the intention to idealize folktales, the popularization of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* compromised their legacy by symbolizing the idealization of the aristocracy and nobility rather than the folk. Although Disney's brand of magic appealed to the everyday American, the movie projected fantasies about triumphing over the evil forces that had prevented the public from returning to the elite American class that existed during the Roaring Twenties. America channeled their fears and problems onto Disney's depiction of the evil queen. Now named Grimhilde, she became the cruel face that prevented Snow from obtaining her own individual identity. Along with preventing Snow from attaining the riches of upward mobility provided by her social status, the audience subconsciously recognizes these situations because of their history of living through the rise of stock market until the crash of 1929 created the Great Depression. The film became a therapeutic way to conquer the fears they faced daily on a level, where they could safely imagine themselves overcoming their financial woes, rather than desperately trying to survive.

### **Characterization: Aspects of Morality and Psychology**

The development of the “Snow White” narrative is dependent upon the social and moral evolution that transformed from associating stepmothers with inherently evil characteristics to introducing morally gray characters. The social change from Grimm, Disney, to the modern era demonstrates Kohlberg’s moral theories that suggest people learn to develop a general understanding of rules by starting out with a good versus evil mentality. As time passed large-scale conflicts like war, forced people to question if humanity was separated into these two categories and asked if character depends on individual choices in dire situations. From the lost generation raised upon the horrors of WWI, to the silent generation where people came of age before WWII, the public lived in an age of naivety and persuaded themselves that the problems they faced could only be seen in black and white. It was not until later that people began to delve into the dichotomy of humanity and realize the complicated nature of society. Similar to the Grimm’s reasoning that a biological mother could not be abusive towards her own children, Americans did not yet understand people were not purely evil beings but justified their violent behavior. The traditional perspective upheld the notion that people were born good or evil, with no room for dispute. In recent years, younger generations have begun to refute this reasoning suggesting inherent dispositions do not exist.

For a modern audience of the twentieth century, the mindset had shifted to a morally gray reasoning and nihilistic interpretation of human nature, which began to see people as equally capable of good and evil. The current generation became convinced civilization was much more complicated and multidimensional than originally portrayed. This logic ushered in a new age that focused on making storytelling more “realistic and gritty.” Post-World War II, along with the tribulations leading up to the new millennium, have shaken off the global mentality of human

incorruptibility. Following the Cold War, skirmishes of near mutually assured destruction, and the aftermath of contemporary wars have left many countries in stages of physical and social reconstruction.

Published by Disney, *Fairest of All* provides a modernist perspective that reflects the American discourse that retells “Snow White’s” the story entirely from the stepmother’s perspective. This version depicts the villain’s rationale and answers why the stepmother is so thoroughly cruel. The author Serena Valentino, uses *Fairest of All* to develop the Queen’s backstory and chronicle the rise and fall of this iconic figure. Under similar circumstances as Snow, the Queen experiences parental abuse and the loss of her mother. In this new text, with a more complex characterization, the Queen attempts to be loving, nurturing, and caring. By chance, the King becomes enamored with her beauty and they have a short courtship. Bound by duty, the King is drawn away to fight in foreign wars to maintain the safety of the kingdom. The King’s wedding gift, a mirror, to the Queen sparks the story major audiences know. He gives her an inscribed mirror from her late father’s collection. In the King absence, the mirror unhinges the Queen, as it becomes a manifestation of the abusive figure that tormented her with the man in the mirror continuing to drive her to mental instability.

The Queen’s personality becomes altered by grief to fit modernists’ multidimensional view that provides understanding to her character, in this case, her regression. Following the death of the King, grief, depression, and neglect overcome the Queen as she depends on others to calm her anxieties. She isolates herself and becomes transfixed with her image. Rationalizing the pain caused by loss, she detaches herself from friends and family, even Snow. The mirror tempers her egocentrism and affirms her insecurities about her image as she recognizes, “the fear that she had grown into the haggard witch her father once labeled her melted away... the very face, of her

father who once battered her with demeaning and disparaging words...she now used her father's validation to cure all her fevered nightmares" (Valentino 152-153). Despite of this comparison her fears thrived as people refused to acknowledge her thoughts about the mirror's power, as potent memories trigger "a sense of connection through objects such as clothing, writings, favorite possessions, and rings" (Zisook 69). In Valentino's version, the function of Queen's behavior derives from her need to be validated, supported, and in control yet her actions show, she relinquishes agency to the mirror.

In deconstructing Grimhilde's motives, *Fairest of All* suggest the Queen's ritualistic affirmation from the mirror is an unhealthy coping mechanism that connects her own behavior to her abusive father's voice as an igniter to her violent choices. Living with a father who insulted her, introduced her to female stereotypes, and familiarized her with standards of beauty caused the Queen to ideas to deep within her subconscious. He compared his daughter to her deceased mother, berating her with insults about her looks while idealizing the mother's beauty through a Madonna complex. The Queen herself admits, "His approval was an obsession and an addiction" (Valentino, 157). Over the progression of time, her exposure to the mirror warped her mentality. In the later chapters of *Fairest of All*, the Queen becomes emotionally withstanding and the overbearing figure audiences expect to see. Her thoughts of pure innocent Snow are mutated to believe Snow is "a selfish wench who cared nothing for her father's memory and was plotting to surpass her mother in the only thing the woman had left in this world – her beauty" (Valentino 235). By exploring into other characters readers see the men in the story make women turn against each other and force them to compete in appearance and power. Although the Queen controls the kingdom, through guilt and insecurity, it is the memory of the men in her life who are still in charge,.

### The Evil Queen: Torn Between Grimm and Disney

All versions of “Snow White” cultivate the wicked stepmother stereotype, however, the Grimms enforced an instinctively cruel villainess while Disney’s modern intake describes the process of vilification through moral reasoning. In the premise of both renditions, the discourse informs, influences, and shapes these culturally distinctive texts from one another. The social philosophies of authors and animators contributed to the public’s perception of the evil stepmother mythology. In “Snow White” and *Fairest of All*, these texts provide their own interpretation of the Queen’s rise to power. A recent movement of thinkers consisting of modernists and post-modernist analyze her obsession with vanity, her projection upon Snow, her pursuit of power, her disguise, and her fall from grace. Seeking to find a rationale that explains the evil actions of the Queen these groups of socially conscious intellectuals create their own account of the circumstances that drive the Queen to madness. Writing from different discourses and exposed to different ideas, Grimm and Disney reflect in their storytelling an evolutionary approach to stepmothers.

The method behind the Queen’s fall separates the Romantics from the Modernists as historical context shapes the readers’ approach to the text. Not to say literature fails to withstand time but rather the complexity and execution of a text changes in favor to newly introduced philosophies. For instance, the brothers’ intent was to reimagine “Snow White” and shave off the rough edges, as “they felt obliged to retell the stories exactly as they had heard them or that they might not combine different versions of a story to introduce motifs in an attempt to arrive at the “best” form” (David & David, 189). The function of their romanticism was to present the story in its purest form, which does not necessarily mean its most honest. Grimm’s focus was more about how the Queen tested Snow as she matured with their version emphasizing the growth of Snow’s character from her mistakes and choices.

The Grimms' "Snow White" portrays the Queen as indisputably evil and irredeemable figure, due to her static character development and function within the story. By harnessing history, the Grimms' simplify the stepmother to a witch who obtains power through her appearance and sexuality. When seduction fails, she uses brute force to maintain her position. Overall, the tale projects female vanity as the main conflict and when Snow shows interest in objects symbolic of womanhood and knowledge she is poisoned. To succeed in the Grimms' world, women must be inherently pure and modest because the Madonna complex sets parameters on female power. Unrealistic standards of femininity anticipate women to be innately feminine, unambitious, and self-sacrificing as reinforced by motherhood. In consequence, believers in strict gender roles chastise women who possess masculine traits that lead to independence. In the end, Snow learns from the Queen to associate beauty as a deadly weapon while submissiveness to men and household duties provide security.

In contrast to traditional text structures like Romanticism, today's audience tend to generate their own renditions that analyze the Queen's motivation. In *Fairest of All*, the stepparent-child relationship from the her perspective appeals to the audience because the discourse has sparked interest in mankind's ability to be kind yet cruel. Current writers and scholars seek to dissect the anatomy of relationships, where the choices of the main character influence their social circle. Instead of solely focusing on Snow, writers expand upon how the Queen's misgivings teach the heroine, and by extension the audience, the correct path to finding peace. However, the stigmatization of stepmothers still pervades texts because writers are quick to use the evil stepmother trope and blame the Queen as a source of abuse. Under the rise of the young adult genre, some audiences still stay loyal to portraying the Queen as the personification of evil. The movement of modernist readers have come to question and hypothesize, rather than

accept a character's narrow portrayal. Audiences expect literary characters to possess comorbid personalities that balance self-destruction and Machiavellian cunningness. Especially for main characters, whose innate goodness has been replaced by skepticism. Audiences allow for wicked stepmothers to exist so long as writers depict the metamorphosis of the characters, in opposition to a static figure whose behavior never escalates.

*Fairest of All* analyzes modernistic psychological factors that warp the Queen's identity to the point of self-destruction and willful malice. Valentino describes the Queen's twisted reasoning and deteriorating mental state as the result of years of abuse, extreme grief, and social isolation. From the perspective of the Queen's younger self, she does not intend to be emotionally controlling and abusive, rather she is presented as someone who justifies her behavior. She fails to see the villain that she has become because she reduces her actions to "tough choices." When abuse occurs in the home it does not always mean the parent intends to be a violent force; sometimes parents fail to view themselves as evil when they don't think what they're doing is wrong. Consequently, the King's death enables the Queen controlling behavior as she grieves until the end of the story. In result, the Queen justifies her abusive behavior through her intense grief:

Complicated griever may perceive their grief as frightening, shameful, and strange. They may believe that their life is over and that the intense pain they constantly endure will never cease. Alternatively, there are griever who do not want the grief to end, as they feel it is all that is left of the relationship with their loved one. Sometimes, people think that, by enjoying their life, they are betraying their lost loved one. (Zisook, 69)

Caught up in her grief, the Queen transforms into an ugly, old crone and reflects the person she never wanted to become, her father, the epitome of what her younger self once despised. She



eventually acknowledges the pain she caused Snow and recognizes her tragic flaw of maintaining grief drove her to abuse. However, during the Queen's moment of self-actualization she dies to what suggests as suicide.

Prior to *Fairest of All* and modernist philosophy, Romantics assumed people were born evil, however, by analyzing the function of reward and punishment in response to behavioral outcomes that perpetuate the evil stepmother myth. Under Grimms' supervision, the Queen realizes the consequences of her actions in relation to the punishment that cumulates to her death. Grimms' version falls back on the tradition of God punishing the wicked and so the Queen learns that she has displeased the new King for her behavior to his wife. Using a good versus evil mentality, the Queen understands she has displeased a higher power than herself and, therefore, her behavior is defined as wicked. She does understand why her behavior is wrong and misses the greater moral of the story. Moreover, she has not connected the pain she has caused Snow to being an abusive parent, rather an enemy of the crown. This ideology emphasizes obedience but also suggests children will not obey if the reward or punishment does not outweigh the stimulus. If the Queen was never punished, she would not feel guilty for her actions and thereby make the purpose of reading the text irrelevant.

A modern text like *Fairest of All* outlines how personal choices lead to this wicked persona. Under this ideological shift, newer versions the text becomes a tool to shape the readers' perspectives and develop socio-emotional skills by realizing bad choices are the cause of vilification. Under contemporary methods, readers can insert themselves into the story and identify themselves with the Queen. The text removes the generalization of blaming all stepmothers by detailing a specific account where a stepparent, as well as a biological parent, are abusive.

### The Child-Stepparent Relationship

Narrowing in on the dynamics of the stepparent-child relationship, the story focuses on the internalized conflicts that has arisen due to Snow and the Queen's opposing reactions to death. *In Fairest of All*, both women have lost their parents, yet their responses have triggered behaviors that differ completely from one another. *Fairest of All's* characterization extends beyond the good versus evil plot as Snow learns to overcome loss in a healthy manner. She focuses on how to overcome grief and abuse through forgiveness, as experts say "During the transition from acute to integrated grief, usually beginning within the first few months of the death, the wounds begin to heal, and the bereaved person finds his or her way back to a fulfilling life" (Zisook, 68). Snow's resiliency prevented her from falling into a resentful, depressive, state that diminishes socialization and increases isolation. Reflecting upon the Queen's behavior, Snow's approach to the situation saves her from the same fate and models for readers how to overcome abuse.

In contrast, the Queen is overwhelmed by the morning, abuse, and isolation that she has endured all her life. Tragically, the Queen lets grief consume her, dictate her personality, and control her choices to the point of self-destruction. Her choices mirror her father who projected his unresolved anger and sorrow about the mother's death onto his daughter. In this scenario, the source of abuse comes from the inept father who isolates her and prevents her from seeking alternatives to managed or at least find an outlet to release her emotions. When the King dies, the Queen relinquishes her power and self-control to her fears and emotions. From the Queen's experiences and limited options to handle grief she transforms from a victim to an abuser, an innocent to a witch.

All renditions of "Snow White" lend itself to grief which morphs into vanity that accelerates the Queen's abusive behavior. *In Fairest of All*, both women parallel each other in

the death of their parents, their role as victims, and their escape from marriage. The Queen's fatal flaw is her strong reaction to loss as the mirror becomes a tormenting projection of her fears since the "dialogue with the mirror can represent an attempt of the individual who has lost contact with true spiritual and moral values to face the truth or the voice of the conscience. In Jungian terms, he is challenged to face his shadow" (Heuscher, 117). For the Queen, her vulnerable state places her in a mentality that sacrifices her values, relationships, and self-esteem to overcompensates for emotional security. Furthermore, her character development becomes stagnate as the mirror requires her to confront her abusive father. Watching the Queen guides Snow away from the path of abuse and helps her escape her grief in order to survive. Although passivity and objectification lingers, Snow's ability to persevere explains why her tale ends with a marriage plot instead of starting with one like the Queen's marriage to the King.

### **Motives and Character Development**

Under the modernist perspective, Disney publishers developed a complex and extreme characterization of the infamous evil Queen that explained why she became a wicked stepmother. Extreme in the sense that her behavior and vanity are deeply rooted in her inability to cope, or rather her only way to cope with grief. In her widower role, she functions in a manner that delves into depression, as “studies consistently have demonstrated that depressed parents are more negative toward their children and more likely to be easily irritated by child behavior. Depressed mothers of infants and young children were more likely to express negative affect and to be physically or verbally aggressive with their children” (Mustillo 166). Her depression transforms her into a parent that is disengaged, punitive, and despondent. Her abuse and grief contributed to psychological scars that have completely changed her personality, in addition to, her relationship with Snow. Under this mentality the Queen becomes selfish but not narcissistic as she struggles to find self-love because she is too involved in maintaining what little love she has for others. Developing an aggressive personality to protect herself and those she cares about in results abusing Snow. She punishes Snow to reinforce her idea that loss is permanent and happiness disrespects the memory of those gone. When Snow disobeys, the Queen decides she will reject Snow first by killing her rather than lose her to someone else. From a modernist perspective, the author takes into account the psychological reasoning that leads the Queen to disregard her morals based her experiences that have helped construct the wicked stepmother identity.

By displacing her attention into her looks, obsessing over the power provided by her appearance, and the affirmations she gains by visiting the mirror the Queen socially and emotionally detaches herself from everyone in the kingdom, including her stepdaughter. She punishes herself for feeling any kind of joy and disciplines Snow for returning to a normal life,

as seen with the prince's courtship. Snow's romance triggers painful memories as she states, "even if it broke their hearts now, it was nothing compared to losing each other to tragedy, betrayal, or death (Valentino 177). The extremism displayed in the Queen's behavior results from her inability to manage her issues with grief in a healthy way. In response, Snow models a perspective that refutes her excessive mourning by arguing "but I cannot live in fear of losing him, for fear on not living my life at all (Valentino 183). These two choices demonstrate for the reader the consequences of poor mental health and the outlook needed to survive loss. The Queen ultimately develops an obsession, that gone unchecked, results in her social and physical death. By confronting the Queen, Snow establishes holding onto emotions and grief causes destruction.

Symbolically, the magic mirror reflects Snow and the Queen's potential futures, squandered opportunities, and personal development. Both women mirror a future where the one could have potentially managed their grief while others resiliency saved her from spiraling into a downward depressive state. However, the strongest parallelism comes from the Queen echoing her abusive father, as he represents the voice of reason from the looking glass in this unwanted prophecy. To complete the cycle of abuse, the Queen literally becomes Snow's mirror at the end, as her face appears in the glass (Valentino 249). Where the text could have made an ironic statement that foreshadows happy ever after as a vicious and continuous cycle, the resolves the conflict by having the stepmother and child parallel each other and reflecting back a mirror image of the characters' growth.

## **Conclusion**

The wickedness of stepmothers, especially in “Snow White,” is based on the discourse that embraces one past that has shaped this nearly two hundred-year treasure. Aspects of technology, heritage, history, religion, philosophy, and psychological aspects illustrate the evolution of stepmothers in folktales. In the Grimms’ romanticized version, the open-ended text suggests Snow replaces her stepmother solely in position, but modern tales produced by Disney demonstrate realistic interactions and thought-processes found in the character development and the dynamics of the stepparent-child relationship. In respect to both Grimm and Disney, they influenced the evolution of media and the presentation of storytelling. However their versions contribute to the misconceptions that hinder women from complete integration in their stepfamilies. These women struggle to guide their stepchildren because gender roles and family dynamics retrain women from asserting their power.

In the many portrayals of fairytale stepmothers, their actions are magnified and critiqued based on beliefs that argue biological relatedness contributes to their cruel dispositions. Apparent in “Juniper Tree” and “Hansel and Gretel,” misconceptions found in these texts facilitate the outsider status of stepmothers. The Queen herself, although stigmatized, represents a complex and humanistic portrayal of an abusive stepmother. Under the circumstances of abuse, grief, and depression, she demonstrates how mental issues impact one’s personality and socialization. Although her character in varying degrees still resembles a tormenting stepmother, readers can now view her vanity as a coping mechanism.

In unraveling the wicked stepmother behind “Snow White,” I hope readers recognize how external factors like social and historical influences impact our interpretation and analysis of texts. Prior knowledge and personal philosophies shaped by cultural socializations influence our perceptions about the books we read. Artists, authors, animators and other storytellers use

characters to project cultural beliefs that either build women up as the beloved heroine or the malicious antagonist.

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