

## BEYOND THE STEREOTYPED STEPMOTHER: PSYCHOANALYSIS OF THE QUEEN FROM *SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS*

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**Abstract:** Fairy tales have been an important part of life and literature. With many cultures around the world practicing the art of story-telling, the art form has developed and blossomed into further sub-forms such as tales, stories, fantasies, novels, anime, cartoons, and the like. While these art forms are not restricted into one genre but share the basic storyline to project through various mediums to cater to the interests of the audience around the globe, the paper focuses on studying the original fairy-tale and its first animation in order to share the findings. When stepmothers are projected as the antagonists in most mediums, the paper explores the inward aspects of Snow White's stepmother – the Queen, as a woman who needs to go beyond being just a mother. Mothers are born when a child is conceived. A woman who accepts children by marrying their father is termed as a stepmother and is stereotyped as the children's villain who is intent on causing mental, physical and emotional turmoil in their lives. The paper analyses the Queen simply as a woman who accepts Snow White as part of her life and works towards doing her best in being a mother to the child who is already grown. The paper focuses on the aspect of the Queen's psyche as she does not have the core time required to grow with a baby or toddler in order to gain maturity as a mother. While the Queen is perceived and portrayed as the evil antagonist who treats Snow White as a slave, the paper analyses otherwise. The findings point out that the humble, affectionate and hardworking characteristics of Snow White were developed by the Queen's efforts by applying the theory of reductionism to prove the hypothesis.

**Introduction:** *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is a world renowned fairy tale which has been produced into many forms based on its original version written and published by the Grimm brothers. The paper has chosen the original fairy-tale, the animation version by Disney released in 1937 and the version telecast through *Once Upon A Time*, the American television series being telecast since 2011. The paper focuses on the different versions of the fairy-tale to advocate for the character of the Queen as that of a woman with her own shares of dreams, hopes, disappointments, heartbreaks and flaws. The crux of the paper is the motive to break the archetype of the evil stepmother.

**Review of Literature:** Thomas Inge in his article *Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs: Art Adaptation and Ideology* (2013) compares Disney's twentieth century adaptation of the nineteenth century writing by the Grimm brothers. He talks about the reshaping of the fairy tale by Disney to reflect the vision of American values. Terri Martin Wright in her article *Romancing the Tale: Walt Disney's Adaptation of the Grimm's "Snow White"* (2010) studies the historical aspect of the animation film. She brings out the fantasy dimension depicted in the traditional tale.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

#### **Chris Baldick explains 'reductionism' as:**

The tendency to explain away the complexities of a literary work as the products of a single, much simpler cause. A **reductive** interpretation of a work reduces or 'collapses' its actual complexity into a reassuring simplicity, seeing it as the direct expression of some originating element such as a

personal motive, a psychological defect, a national or social identity, or a mythic archetype. (283).

The paper applies the theory of reductionism to the character of the Queen who has been infamously perceived as the kind Snow White's evil stepmother in order to prove that the Queen is a woman upon whom has been thrust the responsibilities of being Queen to a nation and stepmother to a grown child. While the former responsibility can be carried out in grace with the help of the royal advisors and commanders, the latter is more of a personal responsibility.

#### **The Queen: The Stereotyped Antagonistic Stepmother:**

*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is a fairy tale originally written by the Grimm brothers and later adapted into animations, films and television series. The story revolves around two women and seven dwarfs. While one woman is the Queen and the other the Princess, their portrayals have been blown out of proportions. Princess Snow White is shown in rags, like a slave, as though being mistreated by her stepmother the Queen. Unfortunately, for the sake of thickening the plot and bringing poetic justice into it, the roles have been stereotyped and made archetypal. Snow White is shown as the poor Princess in rags who is treated like a slave, while the Queen is depicted as the evil stepmother who wants Snow White dead. This depiction of the Queen can be psychoanalyzed by applying the theory of reductionism to the archetypes.

The Queen has been perceived to be the evil stepmother but there is no evidence to prove this perception in the animation. The Queen is seen

observing every move of Snow White but not once is there any direct communication made between the Queen and Snow White except when she is in the disguise of the old peddler woman. She orders the huntsman to bring Snow White's heart in a box as proof, after killing her in the woods. This order of the Queen could have been prompted by the rage caused because of jealousy and can be explained as a case of hysteria.

**The Woman Inside the Queen: Beyond The Portrayal:** According to the story, the Queen is the widowed stepmother of Snow White. While every mother is given the benefit of post-partum depression, the time to adjust to a new life with many changes in her lifestyle and the chances to learn and grow as a mother, the Queen is not. The Queen's plight happens to be very sensitive and challenging. Facing life from a vertex, the Queen is not treated kindly. The starting point of the Queen's marital life and motherhood is usually the midpoint of most women's journey as wives and mothers. Despite all these trials and shortcomings, the Queen accepted the responsibility of taking care of Snow White.

The Queen is not given time to adjust to her new life. This sudden and immense shift in lifestyle could cause stress in every person's life. In addition to having to raise a child, the Queen is also left with the duty of ruling a nation. Despite these humungous responsibilities, the Queen carries herself with a poise that is strong enough to induce fear. The personality of the Queen is powerful enough to radiate fear in the audience and readers. But while looking into the psyche of the Queen, a lonely woman cumbered with huge responsibilities and no shoulder to lean on. In order to fulfill her responsibilities, the queen needs to stay strong. She has to display strength and courage, in the least, in

order to protect herself, the child and the nation from various forces.

This constant internal struggle of the Queen would only increase her stress and cause her emotional heaviness which naturally results in hysteria. But the strength and willpower of the Queen has caused her to find a solution to de-stress herself. The Queen keeps herself ahead in her games enforced upon her by destiny. She is a well read woman which archetypes her as a witch performing black-magic. Snow White has learnt all the skills expected of a woman during that era because of the Queen. This can be interpreted in many ways, so far mostly pessimistically. On the other hand, this can be interpreted as a young widow trying her best to fulfill her responsibilities in raising a daughter and Princess who would be loved and accepted by all – her future family, subjects and people. When the Queen eyes Prince Charming as Snow White blushes, it is not out of jealousy but because of the care she has for Snow White. The Queen, as a mother, would naturally want the safety and security of her child. Given the era the story is set in, the strict values and systems of the time have bound the Queen to take certain measures which might seem too hard.

**Conclusion:** The Queen is not the evil stepmother she is portrayed to be, but is a woman trying to be a mother without any help or assistance. The good nature of Snow White is the success of the Queen's hard-work as a mother. Unfortunately, due to stress, depression and hysteria, the Queen acts out of rage and frustration. The act of trying to kill Snow White can be analyzed in terms of honor-killing, a practice which can be seen being followed till date despite all the growth in civilization, globalization and technology.

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