

### **Feminism and Magic in *Snow White***

Magic is something that has always been very prevalent in fairy tales. Many fairy tales include young women—complacent, innocent, and invariably beautiful young women—who are either terrorized by an evil witch, helped out of a bad circumstance by a fairy godmother, or both. They are expected to handle their misfortune gracefully and show kindness even to their enemies, which they are often rewarded for, and generally this reward is marriage. However, some of these fairy tales can be seen through a more feminist lens. Magical fairy tale women do not have to just be either evil or the bumbling fairy godmother who helps the heroine get her marriage reward. Snow White, for example, has more control over her story than may be apparent. There is a hidden feminist ideology in *Snow White* that we can see through Snow White's use of magic.

Witches—women who can use magic—are, in modern times, a feminist symbol. The witch is a woman who has her own power, and in the case of some stories, *Macbeth*, for example, they have power to drive the plot (Guadagnino, 2018). The witch can be a positive symbol for a woman who has her own agency. If we look closely, we can see clues that indicate that Snow White is not only a witch, but that she is using her own power to drive her story along.

Magic is evident from the very beginning of *Snow White*. Snow White's mother is sewing by the open window, and she pricks her finger. A few drops of blood land in the snow on the ebony windowsill. She then thinks "If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the window frame" (Tatar, 81). Snow White's mother then gets her child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the windowsill. That in itself is magic. In witchcraft, blood is a very powerful tool associated with life, pain, and love (Wigington, 2019), three things that are also associated with bearing children. Snow White's mother has just shown us that she is capable of

using blood magic to fulfill her wish of having such a beautiful child. Blood magic is also associated with death (Wingington, 2019), and Snow White's mother dies soon after giving birth.

This red, white, and black color scheme is also something to be considered. Each of these colors represents an important element of the story, and they also indicate the presence of Snow White's magic. Black is often used to indicate death. In Western cultures it is the color we wear for mourning and funerals (May, 10). In this case, it represents the death of Snow White's mother. Snow White's stepmother also ordered Snow White to be put to death, so the black hair serves as foreshadowing of her story, ultimately telling us that she will "die" at the hands of her evil stepmother and the poisoned apple.

Black also represents evil (May, 10). In Disney's adaptation of *Snow White*, the evil queen is wearing a black cape. This is also true of the TV show *Once Upon a Time*, which is an adaptation of several fairy tales, although it mainly follows the story of Snow White and her wicked stepmother, whose signature color is black. *Once Upon a Time* also shows us black as an evil color when we see the hearts of both the evil queen and Snow White. The evil queen—Regina's—heart is shown to be almost entirely black, darkened by all the evil things she's done. Snow White's heart was shown to have a black spot on it, created when she made the intentional and premeditated decision to use a magical object that would save one of her dying allies at the cost of killing one of her enemies ("Welcome to Storybrooke", "The Miller's Daughter").

Snow White is meant to be the protagonist of this fairy tale. Why, then, does she have this very distinctive trait that is indicative of evil? I believe that it is a symbol of the magic she inherently has in the Grimm version of the story. Witchcraft can be seen as something evil, so even if Snow White herself isn't evil, she still has the potential to do evil things with her magic.

White, while it contrasts against the black of Snow White's hair to look visually striking, represents the spiritual and the supernatural (May, 22). One example of white representing the supernatural is the white stag of Celtic mythology. It is an elusive creature that tends to signal the beginning of an adventure or quest. Once caught, it is known to grant knowledge or wishes (May, 22). The stag is often running through a forest, as forests were "believed to be the gateway to other, supernatural realms" (May, 22). The white stag has shown up in several fairy tales: *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Arthurian legends, and, of course, *Alice in Wonderland's* white rabbit.

Snow White herself could be seen as this tale's white stag. The evil queen chases Snow White through the forest to fulfill her wish of being the fairest woman in the land. The white stag, however, is elusive, and Snow White is able to evade capture by the evil queen, so her wish is never granted. In *Once Upon a Time*, Regina the evil queen is able to catch Snow White. She does so at Snow White's wedding, so Snow White is wearing a white dress, once again emphasizing the image of Snow White as the white stag. Once Regina caught her white stag, she was able to put a curse on her, fulfilling her wish of taking away Snow White's happiness ("Pilot").

Last, we must look at the use of red. As I pointed out earlier, red is used to show the spilling of blood, and also in this case, the use of magic. Red also represents life, femininity, and the presence of danger (May, 34). In this case, it could signify that Snow White has the potential to be dangerous. When we see red in fairy tales, more often than not, it symbolizes blood. It is sinister. This is part of the reason the phrase "as red as blood" is used so commonly. As well as being the color of blood, red is also the color of femininity (May, 29). "Witches are emblematic of a certain kind of innate female power" (Illes, 10). Snow White's red lips—feminine—and white skin—supernatural—mark her as just that; a woman who uses magic, and mark her as a feminist symbol.

We have already looked at the use of blood magic by Snow White's mother and at the clues that point to Snow White herself being magic, but how does Snow White use this magic? The most obvious way is her survival of poisoning by the evil queen, and less obviously the magic she has used on the huntsman.

The evil queen tries three times to kill Snow White. First she suffocates her with lace tied too tightly; next, she gives her a poisoned comb; and last, the poisoned apple. When the queen laces her up, "Snow White's breath was cut off, and she fell down as if dead" (Tatar, 88). So even though Snow White is unable to breathe, she is still alive, and stays alive without breath until the dwarves come home in the evening and are able to cut her out of the lace.

Next, the queen tries to poison Snow White with a comb. "No sooner had the comb touched her hair than the poison took effect, and the girl fell senseless to the ground" (Tatar, 89). Again, Snow White has been poisoned. She has not died yet, but the poisoned item is still affecting her until the dwarves come home and remove it. As soon as the comb is removed, Snow White is revived. She is not only able to survive this poison, but she is also immune to any ill effects it might have on her once it is removed, needing no time to recover.

Last, the evil queen poisons Snow White with the apple. "No sooner had she taken the bite than she fell to the ground dead" (Tatar, 91). When she was laced up, Snow White fell to the ground "as if dead" (Tatar, 88), and when she was poisoned with the comb, Snow White "fell senseless to the ground" (Tatar 89). Neither of the first two poisons actually killed Snow White, but when she eats the apple, she "fell to the ground dead" (Tatar, 91). This is very specific and unambiguous language letting us know without a doubt that the evil queen has killed Snow White. Even the magic mirror believes her to be dead, proclaiming the queen as the fairest in the land, when before, it knew that Snow White had been revived.

The dwarves then put Snow White in a coffin. “Snow White lay in the coffin for a long, long time. But she did not decay and looked just as if she were sleeping, for she was still as white as snow, red as blood, and had hair as black as ebony” (Tatar, 93). The colors once again remind us of the magic her mother used and the magic Snow White herself has. Not only that, but her body does not decay. She might even age a bit as she lies in the coffin, as she was only seven years old when she ran away to live with the dwarves. Once she awakens, she is immediately married to the prince; therefore, she is of marriageable age.

As with the comb, we see Snow White instantly revive once the piece of poisoned apple is dislodged. Snow White has presumably been dead for several years, although her body has not decayed, and in fact has kept aging. She is able to be immediately revived, pulled back to the land of the living with no ill side effects as soon as the apple is jolted out of her throat. This shows us the most obvious use of Snow White’s magic.

In *Once Upon a Time*, Snow White isn’t poisoned to death, but instead is put under a sleeping curse by the poisoned apple. She is still alive and breathing and can be awakened only by the magic of true love’s kiss, which can break any curse (“Pilot”). In this case, the magic is not something that she is able to call upon and use like Grimm’s Snow White, but it is inherent in the love she has for Prince Charming. It is something she is still able to use to save herself when she needs it.

The magic of true love, however, does not only work for romantic love, but for platonic love as well. We see this when Snow White’s daughter, Emma, breaks a curse by kissing her son (“A Land Without Magic”). This brings us to the feminine power of childbirth and mothering. It also circles back to the Grimm version of *Snow White* in which Snow White’s mother used magic to create the child she wanted. In *Once Upon a Time*, Emma has inherent magical abilities because

of the true love that her parents share, true love being the most powerful magic of all (“Queen of Hearts”).

The less obvious use of Snow White’s magic is her power over the Huntsman as well as the forest. The evil queen has summoned the Huntsman to kill Snow White, and he agrees to do so. The Huntsman, therefore, is willing to kill a young child at the order of an evil and cruel queen. He takes Snow White into the woods, and she begins crying and begs the Huntsman to spare her: “Alas, dear huntsman, spare my life. I promise to run into the woods and never return” (Tatar, 83). To this, the Huntsman responds, “Just run off, you poor child” (Tatar, 83). Supposedly, the Huntsman was moved by Snow White’s beauty and let her go, believing that she would be killed by the wild animals in the woods. The Huntsman, however, is used to killing things by nature and had no qualms about killing young Snow White when asked by the evil queen, so why would he suddenly decide to spare her? If he was so moved by her beauty, why would he leave her to die in the woods rather than kill her himself? She would die either way.

The answer to this question comes when Snow White is running through the woods. “The poor child was left all alone in the vast forest. She was so frightened that she looked at all the leaves on the trees and had no idea where to turn” (Tatar, 84). Snow White is afraid to be in the woods because she is a lost child and does not know where to go next, not because she is afraid of any woodland creatures. When she begins running through the forest, “Wild beasts darted past her at times, but they did her no harm” (Tatar, 84). Snow White has no reason to fear the animals in the forest, as they will not hurt her. Clever Snow White used her magic to get the Huntsman to spare her life, knowing that she would survive the forest if he let her go. If we look at witches as “a powerful femininity free from male influence or ownership” (Korvette, 2105), this again shows Snow White’s magic. She will not be influenced by the Huntsman, in fact she will influence him.

It also shows Snow White driving her own plot, just like the witches from *Macbeth* (Guadagnino, 2018).

In *Once Upon a Time*, this theory is further proved. Although *Once Upon a Time* changes many aspects of the *Snow White* story, it shows that there is a magical link between Snow White and the Huntsman. In *Once Upon a Time*, Emma has developed romantic feelings for the Huntsman, and her son, Henry, believes their connection to be due to the fact that he had spared Snow White's life ("The Heart is a Lonely Hunter").

Through the magic used by Snow White's mother, the red, black, and white color scheme, and Snow White's power over both death and the Huntsman, we can see that she uses magic to control her own story. This idea is further proven through the TV adaptation of the *Snow White* story, *Once Upon a Time* in which Snow White not only adheres to the red, black, and white color scheme, but also shows us that she can harness the magic of true love. In this way, Snow White, when closely examined, can be seen to follow the feminist ideology.

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