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Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

Anne Sexton**Given Name:** Anne Gray Harvey**Born:** November 9, 1928; Newton, Massachusetts**Died:** October 4, 1974; Weston, Massachusetts

Quick Reference

First published: 1971, in Transformations**Type of poem:** Narrative

The Poem

Like Anne Sexton's other fairy-tale poems collected under the title Transformations, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" is a long (164 lines), free-verse narrative based on the version of the Snow White tale collected

by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in Germany in the nineteenth century. The darkness and violence of this version may surprise readers who are accustomed to fairy tales that have been sanitized to make them suitable for children, but although Sexton has established a very modern voice in this and the other Transformations poems, she remains faithful to the action that the Grimm brothers recorded.

In “The Gold Key,” the comparatively short poem that introduces the collection, the poet speaks of herself as a “middle-aged witch” with her “mouth wide,” ready to tell readers “a story or two.” The “witch” then imagines a sixteen-year-old boy who “wants some answers.” He is really each of the readers, the witch says, suggesting that the answers are to be found in the tales of transformation recorded by the Grimm brothers. In that introduction, Sexton is explaining why adult readers should pay attention to the sort of story usually considered to be children’s entertainment; she implies that these stories have important meanings.

In “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” Sexton begins with a verse paragraph that describes the character of the virgin in fairy tales; the virgin is not only pure but also doll-like. Only in the next paragraph does Sexton identify this particular virgin as Snow White. She also introduces the beautiful but vain stepmother queen and the magic mirror that tells her that Snow White is more beautiful than she is. The story progresses through its familiar events: The queen orders her huntsman to kill Snow White and to bring the queen her heart. Instead, he frees her and brings the queen a boar’s heart, which she eats. Snow White wanders through dangerous forests for seven weeks and at last comes to the cottage of the seven dwarfs for whom she agrees to keep house. They warn her against opening the door while they are off at their mines, but Snow White is tricked by the disguised queen, who offers her a piece of lacing. The dwarfs rescue Snow White from the deathlike swoon caused by her tightly laced bodice. A second time they rescue her when she is tricked with a poisoned comb. When she succumbs to the queen’s offer of a poisoned apple, however, they can do nothing. Sadly they display Snow White’s body in a glass coffin. That is how a prince sees her and falls in love with her. When the dwarfs allow him to carry her body to his castle, the poisoned apple is dislodged and Snow White revives and marries her prince. The evil queen is invited to the wedding, where she is given “red-hot iron shoes” in which she dances until she dies. Readers are not told that Snow White and the prince live happily ever after, however; instead, Sexton’s final image is of Snow White holding court and looking into her own mirror.

Forms and Devices

As she does with all the Transformations poems, Sexton adds her own voice to the plot elements of the story. It is a voice that is sometimes comic and sometimes admonitory. One source of its comedy rises from the introduction of contemporary items into the traditional tale. When the wicked queen eats what she thinks is Snow White’s heart, for instance, she chews it “like a cube steak.” The queen’s gift of lacing binds Snow White “tight as an Ace bandage.” When she revives, she is “as full of life as soda pop.” When Snow White opens the cottage door to evil a second time, Sexton calls her a “dumb bunny,” and the prince lingers at Snow White’s coffin so long, Sexton says, that his hair turns green.

Although the cube steak and the Ace bandage show Sexton’s gift for the comic simile, her figurative language can also make her story more vivid and underscore the themes that emerge in the tale. During Snow White’s trek through the forest, she meets hungry wolves, each with “his tongue lolling out like a worm.” The forest’s nightmare birds call out “lewdly,/ talking like pink parrots.” The poisoned comb is “a curved eight-inch scorpion.” Sexton compares the red-hot iron shoes in which the wicked queen dances to her death to a pair of red-hot roller skates, uniting the comic with the darkly grotesque.

In this poem, as in many Sexton poems, the reader is also aware of another element in the speaker’s voice, an admonitory voice that sometimes breaks into the narrative to direct the reader’s attention to an important event

or to explain how to interpret a motive or theme. Although editorial intrusion seems more characteristic of nineteenth century literature than of work from the latter half of the twentieth century, Sexton's ironic tone makes it seem both modern and appropriate. After introducing the stepmother's beauty, for example, Sexton addresses the reader directly: "Beauty is a simple passion,/ but, oh my friends, in the end/ you will dance the fire dance in iron shoes." The iron shoes foreshadow the end of the poem. Sexton also uses modern details such as the roller skates to unite parts of the story, as she does with references to the mirror.

Themes and Meanings

In the versions of "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" that have been sanitized for children, the action of the poem usually seems to concentrate on the possibility of violence aimed at the innocent young. In those stories, although the reader assumes the queen to be motivated by her envy of Snow White's youth and beauty, her motives seem to be subsidiary to the theme of violence itself. In Sexton's version, the queen's pride, which "pumped in her like a poison," is diagnosed directly as motivation. Indeed, Sexton says that before the mirror labels Snow White as the most beautiful woman in the land, the girl has been "no more important" to the queen than "a dust mouse under the bed." The mirror's announcement makes the queen suddenly aware of encroaching age and makes her determined to kill Snow White. At the end, the queen is punished for her pride by dancing to death in the red-hot shoes.

Sexton goes beyond simply making the queen a villain, however. In the poem's second verse paragraph, Sexton uses the second-person "you" to suggest to the reader that everyone is subject to the corrupting effects of pride and may be subject to its rewards: "Oh my friends, in the end/ you will dance the fire dance." At the end, Sexton describes the queen's punishment. After describing the shoes that await the queen, Sexton suddenly returns to the second person as someone warns the queen: "First your toes will smoke/ and then your heels will turn black/ and you will fry upward like a frog,/ she was told." Although the "you" in this second passage refers to the queen, the words "she was told" follow the vivid description and invite the reader to recall the earlier warning. Indeed, at the poem's very end, the last picture is of Snow White consulting her own mirror "as women do." Sexton suggests that even Snow White can be infected by the "simple passion" of beauty and the poison of pride that may accompany it.

Another image at the poem's end suggests a second theme: Snow White's "china-blue doll eyes," which "open and shut" like the eyes of a child's doll. The phrases recall the description of the virgin, that "lovely number" introduced in the poem's first verse paragraph. The virgin is the innocent heroine of this tale and many other fairy tales, but Sexton's imagery suggests that she is as empty and artificial as a toy. The opening paragraph introduces another theme as well. The virgin's eyes "Open to say,/ Good Day Mama,/ and shut for the thrust/ of the unicorn." The reference to the unicorn recalls the ancient folktale that a unicorn can be captured only by a virgin; the animal will willingly give itself up to her. Here, however, the "thrust" of the unicorn underscores its sexual symbolism. The virgin's apparent purity, Sexton suggests, may be a ploy by which she captures and marries the prince. Sexton also hints at Snow White's sexual nature in the description of her wandering through the forests of wolves with phallic tongues and lewdly calling birds until she takes refuge in the dwarfs' "honeymoon cottage." Like the virginal heroines of several of Sexton's Grimm poems, Snow White's purity is mostly appearance, and she carries in her the potential for the same sort of evil as her persecutor, the same evil that may put all readers in the iron shoes.

Essay by: Ann D. Garbett

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