

A Short Lecture on the  
Snow White story

“Little Snow White”  
The Brothers Grimm

“Snow White and the  
Seven Dwarfs”  
by Anne Sexton

“Where Are You Going,  
Where Have You Been?”  
by Joyce Carol Oates

# Little Snow White

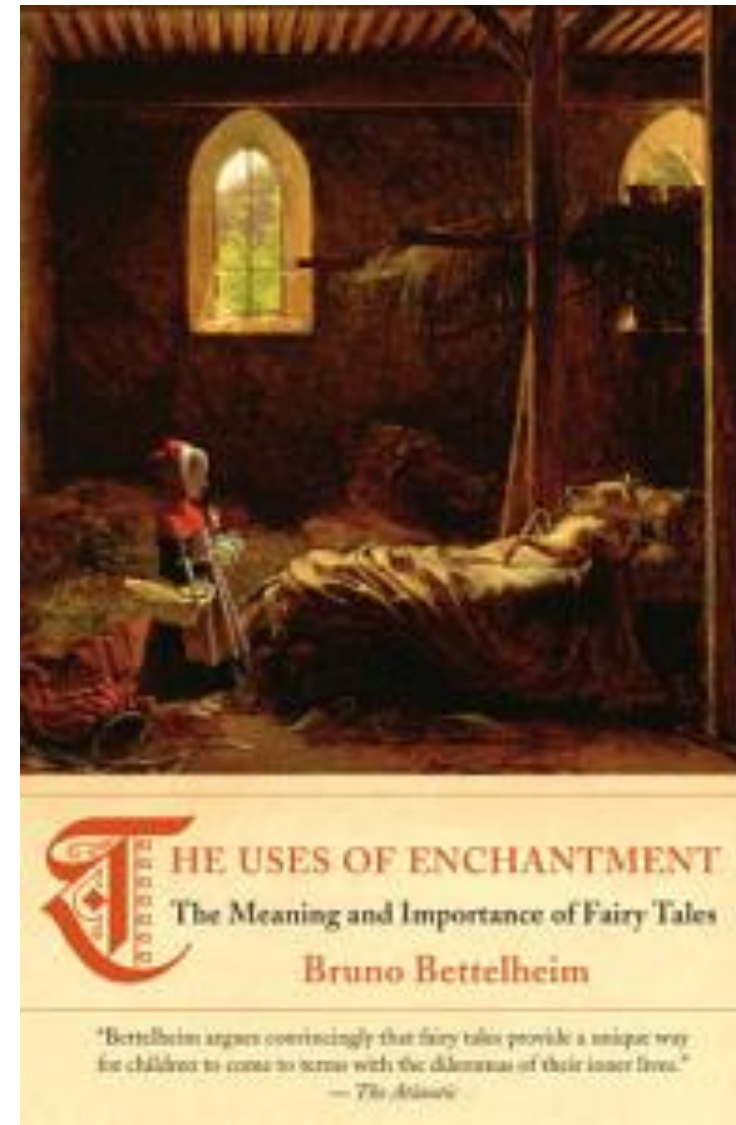






“Little Snow White” by the Brothers Grimm is probably a familiar tale to you. However, the elements of horror in the original version, as opposed to the popular Walt Disney rendition of the story, may be a bit surprising. Some readers are shocked by certain details of the story, such as the stepmother’s eating of what she believes to be Snow White’s organs and the macabre punishment the evil queen meets at the end of the story as her feet are bound into red hot shoes.

A reading of the chapter on “Little Snow White” in Bruno Bettelheim’s seminal book *The Uses of Enchantment* provides rich insight into a psychological interpretation of this and other fairy tales. In his discussion of “Little Snow White,” Bettelheim shows how this work can be read as a coming-of-age story rather than as the whimsical and romantic tale delivered by Disney.





The author points out how Snow White transforms during the course of the story as she learns through trial and experience. First, she must travel through the dark and dangerous forest alone, having been effectively abandoned by both her father and the huntsman, two male figures usually associated with protection.





When she arrives at the home of the dwarfs, no special deference is given to her dramatic beauty, nor is she treated as a princess. Instead, she is required to work in exchange for her room and board and the protection of the dwarfs. In agreeing to this contract, she takes the first step towards responsibility and competence, as she cooks, cleans and cares for herself and others.



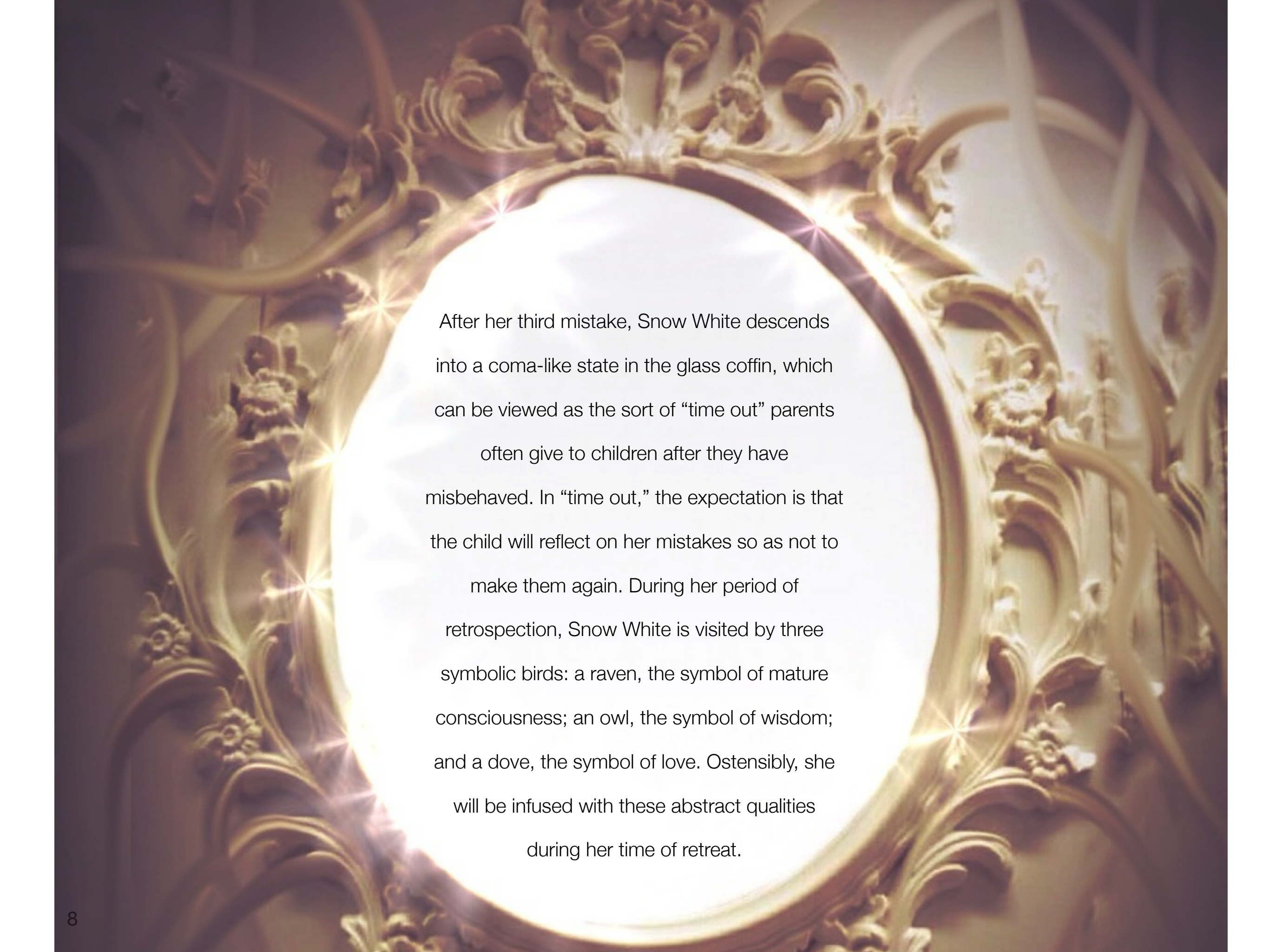


The dwarfs not only offer her sanctuary; they also impart advice and wisdom about the dangers of the world. They warn her about her evil stepmother and admonish her not to open the door to strangers. This is a familiar lesson parents have always imparted to children. And like many children, Snow White does not learn her lesson with the first warning.

Note that each of the temptations Snow White faces is related to desire for something beautiful or to an object that will add to her own beauty. The final offering, the apple, evokes both the Garden of Eden story and the Greek myth in which the golden apple emblazoned with the words “To the Most Beautiful,” is hurled into a wedding party, attended by some very competitive goddesses, setting off the Trojan War.







After her third mistake, Snow White descends into a coma-like state in the glass coffin, which can be viewed as the sort of “time out” parents often give to children after they have misbehaved. In “time out,” the expectation is that the child will reflect on her mistakes so as not to make them again. During her period of retrospection, Snow White is visited by three symbolic birds: a raven, the symbol of mature consciousness; an owl, the symbol of wisdom; and a dove, the symbol of love. Ostensibly, she will be infused with these abstract qualities during her time of retreat.



By the end of the story when Snow White is awakened by the kiss of the prince, she has passed through this time of deep reflection. In addition, she has learned to take care of herself and others. She is now ready to become a wife and begin her life as an adult.

Keep in mind that these tales collected by the Brothers Grimm were written during Medieval times when marriage and motherhood were the designated paths for women. The Brothers Grimm are not the authors of the stories; they are the cultural anthropologists who collected these oral tales and committed them to written form.





Joyce Carol Oates, "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" has been characterized as "a fairy tale gone wrong." Connie, the protagonist, has never been given the age-old advice about not talking to strangers. She has not been asked the questions posed by responsible parents to their teenage children: "Where are you going? Where have you been?" This omission by the parents is fatal, and Connie is never given the opportunity to reflect and grow into adulthood as Snow White does.





In the poem “Snow White” by Anne Sexton, the poet has a different approach to the classic fairy tale. She does not view the tale as a coming-of-age story in which the protagonist develops into a functional adult. Rather, she emphasizes the objectification of young women, especially virgins, and the overarching emphasis society places on female physical beauty.



Your personal interpretation of the Snow White story will depend on many factors as you “complete” it with reflection on your own experience and values.



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