

**The Tale of Snow White – An Exploration of Narrative Through the Lens of
Cultural Context and Its Evolution Over Time.**

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of examination for the BA (Hons) in Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institute.

Signed:



Samira Sikder Mira

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the European fairytales by the Brothers Grimm from their beginnings in Germany. It argues that fairytales are motivated by societal ties, and over time, they evolve and change according to societal norms. An investigation of primary source material, especially in the translated fairytales by the Brothers Grimm, reveal recurring themes of gender roles, societal conformity, and beauty. Analysing Grimm's Snow White helps to understand the society in the 19th century, which lays the foundation to analyse contemporary adaptation stories like '*Snow, Glass, Apples*' by Neil Gaiman, through which we can reflect on how life has changed in the 21st century. In contrast to the Grimm's Snow White, '*Snow, Glass, Apples*' provides an alternative perspective of the story, which challenges the original tale. Both stories are a product of their time, demonstrating societal norms and values at the time they were written.

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INTRODUCTION

The genre of fairytales intrigued me from a very young age, especially when I found out the dark and sometimes gruesome true origins of these tales. I began to wonder why these fairytales were altered over time from the original Grimm and even noticed how much they differed from the sanitised versions represented in Disney. This fascination sparked an interest in this thesis, which explores how fairytales began and how they evolved within our culture today.

Within this thesis, the story of ‘*Snow White*’¹ from the Brothers Grimm, will be used as the primary case study, which discusses gender roles, cultural context, beauty, and the moral of the story. There will be a primary focus on European fairytales collected by the Brothers Grimm and an observation of why the stories were further changed in 19th century Romantic Germany. Stemming from that exploration, there will be an analysis of the contemporary adaptation, ‘*Snow, Glass, Apples*’² by Neil Gaiman to help understand and challenge the original story to find out: What happens to the moral of the story when traditional roles are reversed? This research takes a deeper look into the world of fairytales and explores them with a wider lens beyond just storytelling, but a reflection of society and how it has changed.

The primary research was obtained through reading various versions of Snow White and other fairytale books translated from German to English, particularly ‘*The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers*’³ and ‘*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*’.⁴ Jack Zipes is a renowned American academic, author, and translator whose work greatly led this investigation, as his most notable research is based on fairytales, folklore and children’s literature. In his collection of academic writings, he focuses on social, historical, and political evaluation of fairytales,

¹ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*” Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987)

² Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019)

³ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Jack Zipes, Dező Andrea, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers*.

⁴ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*” Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987) p. 196

carefully examining them and explaining how they challenge or reflect the societal norms at the time. Jack Zipes also provides readers with analysis, context and certain changes made in fairytales from 1812-1837, at the beginning of the translated versions of the Grimm's tales. This helps the audience understand the narrative in its cultural context and gives a deeper insight into society at the time. Many journal articles also helped to confirm my ideas about beauty, modern fairytales and women's role in society. Further primary research was obtained by reading Neil Gaiman's subverted fairytale graphic novels '*Snow, Glass, Apples*'⁵ and '*The Spindle and the Sleeper*'⁶ to understand the difference between fairytales written in the 19th century and the subverted versions of them in the 21st century. The illustrations in these graphic novels help to bring the story to life and help give visual context for the research.

The first chapter examines the beginning of these fairytales and how they slowly evolved over time. Fairytales began through oral tradition, where each story was passed down through word of mouth and told from generation to generation. However, when retelling these stories this way, they begin to change or be forgotten entirely. This inspired story collectors such as the Brothers Grimm to preserve these stories and prevent this from happening. In the beginning, these tales started as folklore that depicted violence and sexual imagery. However, over time, they began to soften these elements or remove them entirely so they would be more suitable for a younger audience. This chapter discusses why the fairytales were altered and looks at the values circulating in 19th century Germany. It aims to show that stories can be used as a powerful tool to socialise certain types of behaviours. Germany was predominantly Protestant at the time, so Christian morals and values were incorporated into the tales. The roles of women and men were very prevalent and were also a factor in how the narrative was shaped. Lastly, stories were also a form of escapism for people and a way to understand one's fears and joys.

Chapter two takes the cultural context explored in chapter one. For example, social norms and gender roles in the 19th century western culture as a framework to investigate gender roles, morals, beauty, good and evil within the 1857 version of Snow White by the Brothers Grimm. The chapter dissects Snow White's tale in its entirety to highlight the patterns present in the revised version of these fairytales. Snow White, in particular, is blatantly obvious about the agenda and

⁵ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019)

⁶ Neil Gaiman, *The Sleeper, and the Spindle* (United States, HarperCollins Publishers, 2015)

moral framework that it tries to get across about how women should behave in society and what happens to them if they choose an alternative path. It reflects the Christian moral messaging that goodness and meekness are rewarded while wickedness is punished. In another aspect, male characters appear dominant and possess characteristics of bravery, loyalty and compassion. It becomes more apparent that men's authority over women is shown when they control Snow White's fate and safety.

Chapter three explores the contemporary adaptation of Snow White's story in Neil Gaiman's graphic novel *'Snow, Glass, Apples'*.⁷ This version of the story contains dark, gothic horror elements in which the roles of the Queen and Snow White are reversed. Analysing this story reveals truths about the original story that were not explicitly present or discussed. For example, the lack of agency Snow White has over herself. Snow Whites innocence and beauty are no longer a moral indicator of goodness; it is now a tool she uses to overthrow the well-meaning Queen, who wants to use her power and wisdom to free the kingdom from Snow White's wickedness. The chapter highlights how the women in the story have autonomy over themselves, revealing their motives and decentring beauty as the primary reason for their actions. The ending of both the original Snow White and *'Snow, Glass, Apples'*⁸ contain the brutal death of the Queen, questioning the original Snow White's character, which depicts her as righteous. This chapter aims to show that the narrative in traditional stories has evolved with the changes in the culture of today regarding our attitudes towards women, sexuality and moral values.

⁷ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019)

⁸ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019)

CHAPTER ONE

The Cultural Evolution of European Fairytales

Fairytales have been an integral part of storytelling since the beginning of time. ‘Their origins’ began ‘in oral tradition’ but were written down through numerous published collections of folklore, such as those produced by the Brothers Grimms and Andrew Lang.⁹ The word “Fairytale” is ‘a children’s story about magical and imaginary beings and land’,¹⁰ which paints a picture of otherworldliness, magic, princes, castles and happily ever after. Though fairytales do possess fantastical elements, these stories often have a bigger purpose, serving as cautionary tales for real-life situations. This chapter will discuss the Brothers Grimm and how the folktales they collected became fairytales composed in books. There will be a primary focus on historical context and societal impact behind the fairytales, which played an important role in promoting social and moral values that reflect the cultural concerns of 19th-century German Society.

1.1 The Brothers Grimm’s Mission to Preserve Germanic Tradition

During the Romantic Era of the 19th century, Germany experienced a national awakening. ‘Romantic Nationalists movement, including J.G.W Herder, Ludwig Tieck and Friedrich Schlegel, were redefining folk song as the fragmentary remains of naturepoesie (natural poetry) of antique nations, and presenting the ‘folk’ as guardians of an ancestral heritage.’¹¹

This led to the formation of story collectors like the Brothers Grimm (Jacob, 1785 – 1863, and Wilhelm, 1786 – 1859) (Fig. 1), who were notable European writers and folklorists. They began

⁹ Steven Swann Jones, *The Fairy Tale*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), p. 10

¹⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, “fairy tale (n. & adj.),” December 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1152560214>.

¹¹ Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p. 94

collecting oral tales, believing these stories represented the “pure” German spirit. ‘Oral tradition’ is the process of the ‘transmission of such messages by word of mouth over time until the disappearance of the message.’¹² To preserve these stories, the Grimms worked together, collecting and writing them down. For example, ‘*Rumpelstiltskin*’ was collected from Lisette and Dortchen Wild (the latter, Wilhelm’s future wife), and a version of ‘*Snow White*’ was collected from the 17-year-old Jeanette Hassenpflug’.¹³



Fig 1: Ludwig Emil Grimm’s *Pencil drawing of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1843)*. S. 15.3 x 14.9 cm¹⁴

The first edition of these stories was published in 1812 as ‘*Kinder - Und Haus Märchen (Children’s and Household Tales) Vol.1*’ and then Vol. 2 in 1815. They later expanded editions in 1857, where the final and most famous editions were published. According to Jack Zipes, ‘The original

¹² The Vansina, Jan M., *Oral Tradition As History*, (Madison United States, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p.3

¹³ Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p. 72

¹⁴ <http://www.zeno.org/Kunstwerke/B/Grimm,+Ludwig+Emil%3A+Jacob+und+Wilhelm+Grimm+%5B1%5D>

primitive and feudal components were reworked and adapted to the bourgeois value system that was in ascendance at this time'.¹⁵

Originally, these folktales were not intended for children, hence why the Brothers Grimm revised them, incorporating Christian morals vales while removing explicitly sexual elements. For example, the first edition of *Rapunzel* is a 'tale in which the young girl gets pregnant'. The 1819 version is much more 'sentimental and without a hint of pregnancy'.¹⁶ This example demonstrates the type of Christian moral messaging promoted in the 19th century, particularly the belief that sexual relations should be confined to marriage, reinforcing purity culture, which is a fundamental part of Christian teachings.



Fig 2: Illustrated by Ludwig Grimm, engraved by L.Haas, *Frontispiece and decorative title page of an 1819 edition of the Brothers Grimm's 'Kinder-und Hausmarchen' (1819).*

1.2 Cultural Context

¹⁵ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p.190

¹⁶ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Jack Zipes, Dezö Andrea, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), xxxvii.

Some of the most popular stories in the early version of ‘Kinder - Und Haus Märchen (Children’s and Household Tales)’, include “*Schneewittchen (Little Snow White)*,” “*Aschenputtel (Cinderella)*”, “*Dornroschen (Briar Rose)*”, and “*Rotkappchen (Little Red Riding Hood)*”. In the book ‘*Children, Media and Culture*’ by Messenger Davies and Máire McGraw-Hill, there is an exploration of Maria Tatar’s interpretations of the Brothers Grimm’s work. Maria Tartar claims that the Grimms ‘rewrote them so extensively and went so far in the direction of eliminating off-colour episodes that they can be credited with sanitising folk tales and thereby paving the way for the process that made them acceptable to children’s literature in all cultures’.¹⁷ ‘The Grimm’s Nursery and Household Tales’ were later published in English in 1823.¹⁸ They have ‘been bestsellers ever since; despite the violence, the title indicates that the book was clearly aimed at children and continues to be so’.¹⁹ Although the Grimms removed parts deemed unsuitable for children, they preserved harsh punishments for villains to reinforce moral consequence. So why did the Grimms feel the need to do this? There were many reasons for this shift from folklore to fairytale, some of which include;

1. Religious and Moral Values - Good vs Evil

Germany at the time was a predominantly Christian country, with a significant protestant influence. According to renowned folklorist Jack Zipes, there was a ‘massive influence of the Christian church and its various belief systems’ in Europe. He explains that ‘the fairy tale was often cropped and altered in books for young readers to reinforce dominant religious and patriarchal attitudes about gender, mating, law and order’.²⁰

As a result, the Grimms removed more explicit and sexual elements in the earlier folk version, reshaping the tales to align with Christian social values. These narratives place a significant emphasis on good vs evil, framed in a distinctly Christian manner. Wicked characters are often associated with sorcery and have immoral intentions. The good characters possess traits of honesty, obedience and diligence, which were associated with Christian values at the time. Typically, at the end of each story, the wicked are punished brutally to emphasise justice and uplift

¹⁷ Davies Messenger, Máire, *Children, Media and Culture*, (Maidenhead United Kingdom, McGraw-Hill Education, 2010), p.132

¹⁸ Grimm, Jacob Ludwig C., *German Popular Stories*, trans. And ed. Edgar Taylor (London, 1823).

¹⁹ Davies Messenger, Máire, *Children, Media and Culture*, (Maidenhead United Kingdom, McGraw-Hill Education, 2010), 132

²⁰ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p.13

virtue. ‘Marriage is the ultimate goal in most fairy tales’²¹ resulting in a happily ever after reserved for the good characters, reinforcing Christian ideals. Religious people tend to ‘ascribe to their gods not only with ordinary human qualities but excellences of various kinds, among these may also be a strong desire to punish wickedness and to reward virtue’.²² This sentiment is evident in these fairy tales. For instance, in the story of ‘*Snow White*’²³ by the Brothers Grimm (1857), the Evil Queen engages in what might be seen as acts of sorcery, for example, ‘she had a magic mirror’²⁴ with what she often communicated with. (Fig. 3) She also changed her appearance to deceive and ultimately attempts to murder Snow White. Through her malevolent actions, the Queen is severely punished, whereas Snow White is depicted as an obedient, innocent and compassionate character who is represented as the ideal 19th-century woman. This pattern appears in many other stories written by Grimms, for example, in the story of ‘*Cinderella*’²⁵ (1857). When we compare the characters of Snow White and Cinderella, we notice that they are both obedient, kind, and patiently waiting for their prince to rescue them. They do not fight against the wicked deeds of their stepmothers. Andrew Teverson explains, ‘Their reward and punishments follow accordingly: the Queen, in the Grimm story, is forced to dance to death in red-hot shoes, and Snow White marries – or rather is married by – the Prince’.²⁶

²¹ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p.183

²² Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p. 187

²³ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*” Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987)

²⁴ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*” Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987) p. 196

²⁵ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, “*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*” Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987)

²⁶ Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p.138



Fig 3: Richard Andre illustration in 'Grimm's Household Fairy Tales' Trans. McLoughlin Brothers, depicting the Evil Queen gazing into the magic mirror.

In the story of Cinderella from the same collection of Grimm's works (1857), the heroine is stripped of her rights, dressed in rags and forced to become the housemaid in her own home, where she 'worked hard'²⁷ and stayed obedient. Her suffering demonstrates a moral trial rather than an

²⁷ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Jack Zipes, Dező Andrea, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 70

injustice to be resisted. Ultimately, Cinderella's hardships come to an end, and she is rewarded with marriage, when the prince 'led Cinderella away'²⁸ to become his bride. As in '*Snow White*'²⁹ (1857), the ending concludes with marriage, signifying moral and structural resolution. This pattern demonstrated what Jack Zipes recognises as a recurring moral logic within the fairytale tradition. Although his analysis focuses on Blunck's tales rather than Grimm directly, Zipes describes a structure in which 'the woman is self-sacrificial', virtuous and obedient, and if she stays on this path, she has 'no need to fear the wrath of God'. This structure is found both in Cinderella and Snow White, where female purity and patience are rewarded through marriage, while transgressive female figures are punished. The moral of this story reinforces the Grimms Christian moral framework that 'reward a woman's diligence and patience to marriage'.³⁰

2. Emphasis on the Nuclear Family Clichéd Gender Roles

By the 1820s-1830s, Germany and Europe had an increased growth of the middle class, also known as the bourgeoisie, who were educated and family-oriented individuals. Childhood began to be seen as an innocent phase of life that needed moral guidance with ideas rooted in protestant values. Families wanted stories for their children that were a form of entertainment but also contained a moral lesson in the end. Jack Zipes explores this idea and explains that these stories often promote the idea of a nuclear family: 'Fertility and large families are esteemed in the fairy tale'. He expands this idea by adding to the fact that 'at the head of the extended family is an authoritarian male, who makes most of the decisions'.³¹ This structure is evident across several Grimm tales. For example, in '*Briar Rose*'³² (1857), the king exercises absolute control over his daughter and 'orders that all spindles in his entire kingdom were to be banned' to 'save his dear child'.³³ This example shows

²⁸ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Jack Zipes, Dezö Andrea, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 77

²⁹ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*" Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987)

³⁰ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p. 209

³¹ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p. 194

³² Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*" Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987)

³³ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Jack Zipes, Dezö Andrea, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 163

a family model grounded in male authority and social order, reflecting the bourgeois Christian values that shaped the Grimm's revisions.

In many stories, the stepmother is often depicted as cruel and cold-hearted. This is seen across numerous fairytales such as "*Cinderella*", "*Snow white*", "*Beauty and the Beast*" and "*Hansel and Gretel*". When the woman possesses too much authority, she is often portrayed as an unlikable character who causes havoc in the protagonist's life. Although it is essential to note that 'if the mother, queen, or fairy godmother appears in a more active role than the male, she still acts in favour of the patriarchal society'.³⁴ This gender-based role portrayal can be seen in the story of '*Cinderella*'³⁵ by the Brothers Grimm (1857). Cinderella is an obedient, domestic woman who is treated like a servant by her lazy stepsisters and conniving stepmother. To prove a woman's worth, 'the young girl must display through her actions such qualities as modesty, industriousness, humanity, honesty, diligence, and virginity. Moreover, she must be self-effacing and self-denying'.³⁶

Young men, on the other hand, play a 'more active' role, where they 'must demonstrate such characteristics as strength, courage, wisdom, loyalty, and, at times, a killing instinct'. Collectively, these points show that 'in all social classes, the young male and female protagonists may have conflicts with their original family, but they do not reject the institution of the patriarchal family'.³⁷ Thus, the depiction of gender roles presented in these narratives serves as a mechanism through which children are socialised into traditional expectations of masculinity and femininity.

3. Psychological Undertones within Narrative

Fairytales such as '*Snow White*'³⁸ and '*Briar Rose*'³⁹, offered an accessible lens to understand deep fears and desires such as abandonment, transformation, death, love and rebirth. Over time genre

³⁴ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p. 194

³⁵ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*" Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987)

³⁶ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p. 194

³⁷ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p. 194

³⁸ Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, Jack Zipes and Dezö Andrea. *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, xxxvii.

³⁹ Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, Jack Zipes and Dezö Andrea. *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015, xxxvii.

evolved into narratives that reflected the changing collective anxiety of life at the time, from tales of survival in a peasant's life, seen in stories like *'Jack and the Beanstalk'*, to moral temptation in bourgeois life as seen in *'King Thrushbeard'*. Psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Bruno Bettelheim later viewed these tales as psychological tools for understanding the self and growing up.

According to 'The Uses of Enchantment', Bruno Bettelheim argues that 'myths and fairy stories both answer the eternal questions: what is the world really like? How am I to live my life in it? How can I truly be myself?'.⁴⁰ Fairytales respond to these questions by employing uncanny or dreamlike settings to evoke deep, primitive human feelings and experiences. It also speaks to unfulfilled desires and hopes but also fears we may have deep within ourselves. This can be seen in the story of *'Little Red Cap'*⁴¹ by the Brothers Grimm (1857). Little Red Cap is told by her mother not to 'stray away from the path'.⁴² The forest acts as an uncanny setting, both familiar and threatening, and straying away from the path evokes fear of the unknown. Little Red Cap's decision to leave the path reflects a desire for freedom and curiosity, suggesting a longing to explore beyond imposed boundaries, even as the tale warns against these behaviours. Freud explains that it is 'unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling to fantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed, and all our suppressed acts of volition which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will'.⁴³ Freud's explanation shows that these stories allow the reader to explore their fantasies and desires in the form of escapism, with the illusion of freedom, which was often denied in real life in the 19th century.

1.3 Conclusion: Romanticism and the Product of Grimm Fairytales in the 19th Century

This chapter outlines the foundation of the most famous and beloved fairy tales in Europe, collected by the Brothers Grimm and how they were reshaped to fit the cultural values of 19th-century Romanticism. The original oral folktales were altered into morally instructive fairytales

⁴⁰ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), p. 45

⁴¹ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*" Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987)

⁴² Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Jack Zipes, Dezö Andrea, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brother Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 85

⁴³ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny." *New Literary History* 7, no.3 (1976), 630

that included Christian beliefs, prescribed gender roles and offered psychological escapism to their audience. Through the sensitisation of these tales, the Grimms were able to highlight a clear distinction between good and evil that functioned as tools of cultural and moral education. This foundation will allow for further analysis of the story of '*Snow White*' in the next chapter and even further explorations of contemporary adaptations and how they subvert the values of the original, changing the moral of the story or questioning the moral of the story in chapter 3.

CHAPTER TWO

The Moral Ideal of the Nineteenth Century in the Original Story of ‘Snow White’ by the Brothers Grimm (1857)

Chapter one explored the context for the formation of morals applied to fairytales in the 19th century through the cultural context. This gives the foundations to now explicitly explore the morals within the story of Snow White, highlighting the lessons in the story. This chapter will also explore the role of beauty and gender from the book ‘*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*’, translated by Jack Zipes and illustrated by John B Gruelle.⁴⁴ The collection of these stories is the revised, final version by the Brothers Grimm in 1857. Themes such as gender role and gender division are explored to properly understand what values shaped society in the 19th century. By analysing the original tale of Snow White in this chapter, it will lay out the groundwork for chapter three, where the morals of the story are subverted in the 21st century adaptation.

This version of the classic tale is about a young, beautiful girl ‘who was as white as snow, as red as blood, and her hair as black as ebony’.⁴⁵ These traits are not just a description of her beauty but a symbol of goodness and innocence, and a direct reason that ignites her stepmother, the Evil Queen’s, jealousy. Scholarly research by Baker-Sperry and Grauerholz’s discourse analysis demonstrates that there is a ‘clear link between beauty and goodness’ in fairy tales, particularly in younger female characters, while ugliness relates to evil.⁴⁶ The tale of Snow White follows the format explored by Baker Sperry and Grauerholz’s shown in how Snow White’s physical attractiveness signifies innocence, virtue and moral purity, but the Queen’s fear of losing her

⁴⁴ Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y. : Bantam, 1987)

⁴⁵ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y. : Bantam, 1987) p.196

⁴⁶ Baker-Sperry, Lori, and Liz Grauerholz, “The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Feminine Beauty Ideal in Children’s Fairy Tales.” *Gender and Society* (17, no. 5, 2003) pp. 718-719. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3594706>. Accessed 7th December 2025

beauty equates to wickedness and moral corruption. This leads the Queen to order the Huntsman to kill Snow White, but he takes pity on the girl and lets her go into the forest, where she meets the Seven Dwarves, who shelter her in their home. The Queen attempts to murder Snow White three separate times and eventually succeeds, but soon Snow White is rescued by the prince. In the end, Snow White is married to the prince, and the Queen is punished for her wickedness.

2.1 Snow White by The Brothers Grimm: The Role of Beauty and the Division in Gender Roles.

What sort of role does beauty play in this story? Does Snow White's beauty and youth emanate trust and innocence? Looking directly at the source material, there are a few examples that support this claim. For instance, the Seven Dwarves immediately forgive her for rummaging through their household items when finding her asleep in their bed. 'What a beautiful child!' they say, 'they were so delirious with joy that they did not wake her up. Instead, they let her sleep in the bed'.⁴⁷ (Fig. 1) This begs the question: would the Dwarves have still let Snow White sleep undisturbed and welcomed her into their home if she weren't beautiful? At this point in the story, the Dwarves don't know who she is, why she is there, or what her intentions are. They assume, because of her beauty and youth, that she is innocent and will cause them no harm. Wilson and Eckel question 'Can attractiveness signal trust or worthiness?.' They found that we tend to associate good-looking people with positive qualities. 'If attractive people act in a manner consistent with expectations, then attractiveness is a credible signal'.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y. : Bantam, 1987) p. 199

⁴⁸ Rick K. Wilson and Catherine C. Eckel, *Judging a Book by its Cover: Beauty and Expectations in the Trust Game*, (Vol. 59, Issue 2, 2006) p. 191. <https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.iadt.ie/stable/4148087?seq=4>. Accessed 10th December 2025



Fig 4: Snow White asleep surrounded by the dwarves (John B. Gruelle), *'The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm'*, Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, Trans. Jack Zipes, (1987), P. 198.

The Dwarves' reaction to finding Snow White sleeping is evidence that her beauty gives her certain privileges and protections in a society that values physical attractiveness. It also helps that she possesses qualities of obedience and virtue. This is a perfect representation of an ideal 19th-century woman and is central to the narrative's ethical framework.⁴⁹ The Dwarves let her stay in their home under one condition: they say, 'If you'll keep house for us, cook, make the beds, wash, sew, and knit...you can stay with us, and we'll provide you with everything you need.'⁵⁰ Jack Zipes explains that 'Snow White is given instructions that commensurate with the duties of a bourgeois girl.' The tasks that she performs are 'implicitly part of her moral obligations.' Zipes continues by stating that the tasks given are to justify the moral division of labour that categorises the roles of the sexes. In the 19th century, women were expected to be confined to a domestic and passive role within the

⁴⁹ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p.83-85

⁵⁰ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y. : Bantam, 1987) p.199

household.⁵¹ (Fig. 4) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, two prominent feminist literary critics and authors of the book *'The Mad Women in the Attic,'* conclude that 'fairy tales offer models of how culture wants its hearers to be, and so helps socialize them into conforming to certain kinds of behaviour'.⁵²

In contrast to the role of the female in the narrative, the men in Snow White are portrayed as productive and morally legitimate. Jack Zipes argues that 'to be civil in any society, one must understand and follow social codes that are not of one's making and determine to a large degree one's sexual identity and social status'. This framework is evident in the portrayal of the male characters in Snow White. The Dwarves are depicted as hardworking as they mine for 'minerals and gold' in the mountains⁵³ representing honest labour. The Huntsman is granted moral authority as he gets to decide if Snow White lives or dies. As a result, he is praised for his compassion as 'he took pity on her' and did not kill her. Similarly, the Prince is a figure of male authority because he controls Snow Whites fate. He demands, 'Come with me to my father's castle. I want you to be my wife'.⁵⁴ 'Snow White felt that he was sincere, so she went with him.' This highlights the male dominance over female submission. Andrew Treverson explains that 'Snow White is the good woman because she is subservient to the male order'. From a patricidal view, she is 'meek, passive, obedient to command and willing to do housework'⁵⁵ which juxtaposes the characterisation of her male counterparts who order her around. (Fig. 5)

⁵¹ Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), p.95

⁵² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1979) p. 54

⁵³ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y.: Bantam, 1987) p.198

⁵⁴ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y. : Bantam, 1987) p. 204

⁵⁵ Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p.138-140

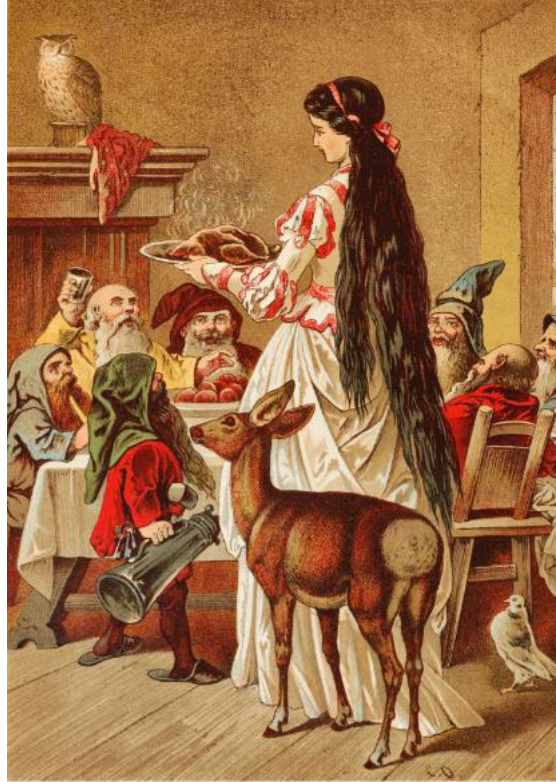


Fig 5: Carl Offterdinger *Snow White* (1829-1889), depicting Snow White serving food to the Dwarves. Oil on canvas.⁵⁶

This portrayal of Snow White as a soft, traditionally feminine figure directly opposes the Queen's aggressive, morally corrupt nature. The Queen takes on an active, dominant role that conflicts with her status as a woman in society. Treverson argues that the Queen's role 'usurps the role of male authority'. This is shown when she orders the huntsman to kill Snow White and thus 'takes upon herself the power of active creation'. This breaks away from the ideal role of a 19th-century woman, which results in the Queen's eventual punishment.⁵⁷ Across many fairy tales, there is a recurring pattern in which women who tread beyond the traditional framework are punished. This is not limited to just Snow White but can also be seen in other tales, such as '*Cinderella*' 1857. The stepsisters were brutally punished when 'pigeons pecked out' their eyes, leaving them blind 'due to their wickedness and malice'.⁵⁸ Both the Queen and Cinderella's stepsisters have ambitions.

⁵⁶ <https://pxcanvasprints.com/featured/snow-white-digital-remastered-edition-carl-offterdinger.html?srltid=AfmBOoqFHVkDHfZiLFr4RZuXu0n1NcGEKE7N2ptiSHVml26jGhuboYHi>

⁵⁷ Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p.138-140.

⁵⁸ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y. : Bantam, 1987), p.92

The Queen's ambition does not just stem from vanity, but additionally for the pursuit of power through beauty. The stepsister's motivations come from their desire to have a better life, which will come about if they marry the prince.

The traditional fairytale vilifies women even when they want to fit into the patriarchal mould. To be beautiful, one must not age; to be worthy to marry the prince, one must be beautiful and virtuous. Their punishment is justified by making cultural anxieties about female autonomy beneath moral judgment. Marcia R. Lieberman explains that 'good-temper and meekness are so regularly associated with beauty', while ugliness is associated with being 'ill-tempered'. Girls will win a prize if they are the 'fairest of them all', and boys will win if they are 'bold, active and lucky'. The moral of such stories suggests that children should be suspicious of 'ugly girls' who are often portrayed with traits like cruelty and unscrupulousness. It also teaches children to be jealous of 'beautiful girls'; who's beauty is a gift that cannot be attained.⁵⁹ Through analysis of characters like Cinderella's stepsisters and the Queen in Snow White, fairytales reveal how female desire is pathologized and disciplined. This ensures that women who challenge established gender roles are narratively punished and ideologically contained.

In the narrative, the Queen is depicted as shallow and vain, driven mad with obsession over her stepdaughter's appearance. 'Her hate for the girl was so great that her heart throbbed and turned in her breast'.⁶⁰ The magic mirror is a symbol of her fixation to preserve her beauty. 'Learning to become a beautiful object, the girl learns anxiety about – perhaps even loathing of – her own flesh'.⁶¹ The Queen is portrayed as an ageing woman gone mad, trying to look younger. Cristina Bacchilega explains that the patriarchal framework in Snow White's tale, 'takes the two women's beauty as the measure of their (self)worth' as shown in how beauty is to the central narrative and also a moral indicator of "goodness". This framework then 'defines their relationship as a

⁵⁹ Lieberman, Marcia R. "'Some Day My Prince Will Come': Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale." *College English* 34, no. 3 (1972): 383–95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/375142>. Accessed 4 February 2026.

⁶⁰ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y. : Bantam, 1987) p.197

⁶¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1979) p. 54

rivalry',⁶² emphasises that women must compete with one another to remain the 'fairest of all'.⁶³ The storyline of ageing and loss of one's beauty, highlighted in Snow White, reflects the real-life problem in our current society of how we demonize the ageing woman and our own obsession with preserving youth. 'The voice of the looking glass, the patriarchal voice of judgment that rules the Queen's - and every woman's - self - evaluation'.⁶⁴

⁶² Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, University of Pennsylvania Press), 1999. P. 36

⁶³ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y. : Bantam, 1987) p.196

⁶⁴ Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p.138 - 140

2.2 Conclusion: Snow White: The Moral of the Story

This chapter analyses the original 1857 tale of Snow White, detailing how she fits the ideal standards of a 19th-century woman. Snow White's character is depicted as submissive and virtuous, while the male characters are marked as dominant figures who control her fate. The Queen, however, represents a transgressive form of female power that challenges traditional gender roles and is therefore harshly punished. This tale demonstrates the moral expectation for women to conform to the male order while equating feminine beauty to goodness and vilifying the ageing woman losing it. This tale indicates how women were expected to behave in the 19th century, but what happens to a story when it is re-written in a time when cultural norms have changed? How might a traditional tale also evolve when the roles of the characters are reversed? The next chapter will explore how dynamics are reworked through role reversal and role shifts in Neil Gaiman's contemporary adaptation, *'Snow, Glass, Apples'*.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019)

CHAPTER THREE

The Transformation of Narrative: The Impact of Role Reversal in the Modern Subversion of Snow White in the Works of Neil Gaiman

This chapter explores the subversive reinterpretations of Snow White in the works of Neil Gaiman's *'Snow, Glass, Apples'*⁶⁶. A particular emphasis will be on the topic of role reversal and its impact on the moral of the story, centering on women's agency and the politics of beauty. This story reflects the evolution of tales for a contemporary audience, reflecting cultural shifts into the 21st century. It uses the framework of the traditional narrative to highlight a world that has changed which is reflected in the story.

While gender-based injustices continue to persist and women face social expectations rooted in 19th century ideals, it is important to acknowledge the significant progress made in transforming societal attitudes towards women. These changes are often reflected in our literature, as seen in Grimm's fairytales. Feminist poet Adrienne Rich suggests cultural institutions like education can either reinforce gendered inequalities or obstruct them by encouraging women to actively "claiming" it rather than passively "achieving" it. Literature operates similarly to this idea. Rich urges 'women to resist their historic positioning as passive subjects'⁶⁷ as seen in traditional fairytales where women were encouraged to do the opposite. In Neil Gaiman's *'Snow, Glass, Apples'* the female characters in the story persistently challenge these inherit narratives. By reversing roles and assigning agency to the characters, Gaiman's retelling interrogates the social expectations that once confined female characters to submission.

⁶⁶ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019)

⁶⁷ Bailey, Lucy E., and Karen Graves. "Gender and Education." *Review of Research in Education* 40 (2016): 682–722. pp. 683. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44668634>. Accessed 23 February 2026.

Neil Gaiman is an author, best known for his writings in fantasy, horror, and the fairy tale genre. Some of his books in this genre include: *'Coraline'*,⁶⁸ *'The Sleeper and the Spindle'*⁶⁹ and *'Hansel and Gretel'*.⁷⁰ Fairy tales are often dismissed as childish stories; Gaiman reminds the reader 'how and why fairy tales are still vital' by taking existing tales and rewriting new ones for a contemporary audience.⁷¹

3.2 Snow, Glass, Apples – Role Reversal and the Politics of Beauty

Neil Gaiman's fascination with subverting Snow White's tale can be found in a multitude of his works, including *'The Sleeper and the Spindle'*.⁷² However, this chapter will concentrate on the gothic horror, graphic novel *'Snow, Glass, Apples'*, illustrated by Colleen Doran.⁷³

The graphic novel is drawn in the style of Harry Clarke, who was a renowned Irish stained-glass artist and book illustrator. Colleen Doran states, 'I've admired Harry Clarke's work since I was a teenager... Neil Gaiman, also a great admirer of Clarke, decided that Snow, Glass Apples would be great for this style.'⁷⁴ The artwork gives an eerie but traditional Gothic edge to the overall look and feel of the story.

⁶⁸ Neil Gaiman, *Coraline* (195 Broadway New York, HaperCollins Children's Books, 2012)

⁶⁹ Neil Gaiman, *The Sleeper, and the Spindle* (United States, HarperCollins Publisher, 2015)

⁷⁰ Neil Gaiman, *Hansel and Gretel* (United Kingdom, Bloomsbury Children's Books, December 11, 2014)

⁷¹ Hank Wagner, Christopher Golden, Stephen R. Bisette, *Prince of Stories: The Many Worlds of Neil Gaiman* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2008), p.2

⁷² Neil Gaiman, *The Sleeper, and the Spindle* (United States, HarperCollins Publisher, 2015)

⁷³ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019)

⁷⁴ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), unpaginated.



Fig 6: Colleen Doran's 'Snow, Glass, Apples' (1994), depicting early sketches and concept artwork.

The artwork was strategically executed to not 'appeal to kids, for obvious reasons',⁷⁵ As the images follow the narrative closely, a narrative which is not child-friendly (Fig. 6). This retelling of Snow White's tale features horrific, vampirical, and sexual elements that are told through the perspective of Queen Regina, who is also the narrator of the story. It is a much darker and more gruesome version of Snow White compared to the Brothers' Grimm story, which also had dark undertones. Differing from the original version of this fairytale, role reversal is at play where we are introduced to a 'not-so-evil queen' who 'is terrified of her monstrous stepdaughter and determined to repel this creature and save her kingdom'.⁷⁶ Much like the original tale of Snow White, the Queen tries everything to destroy Snow White to no avail. In Gaiman's version, the Queen's motive is to save her kingdom, while in the original version, her motives stem from jealousy. Instead, Snow White becomes stronger and uses her beauty and sexuality to seduce men and feast on their blood. At the end of the story, the kingdom turns against the Queen through lies fed by Snow White and the

⁷⁵ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁷⁶ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

prince. The Queen laments, ‘They have told the people bad things about me – a little truth to add savour to the dish, but mixed with many lies’.⁷⁷

The Politics of Beauty

This section explores how role reversal addresses the subject of beauty in Gaiman’s version of Snow White and how it differs from the original story. What happens when beauty isn’t the central narrative and is not the moral indicator of goodness? What if instead, it is used statically to gain power and manipulate others? Jeana Jorgensen explores this idea by explaining that ‘Fairy tales deal with desire...including but not limited to material goods, power, and sexual union.’ When fairy tales are rewritten more erotically, sexual desire is more prevalent, highlighting the ‘desire for power over other human beings’.⁷⁸ Jorgensen continues to say that ‘Since fairy tales have been incorporated into children’s literature,’ the erotic versions have an ‘element of gleeful perversion’ because they expose adult themes that were already present but hidden under the surface of these stories.⁷⁹

In ‘*Snow, Glass, Apples*,’ Snow White is represented as a vampiric creature with similar features to those presented in the Brothers Grimm original story. However, the features in this story carries a dark and twisted meaning rather than a measure of goodness in the original tale. ‘Her eyes were black as coal, black as her hair: her lips were redder than blood... Her teeth seemed sharp...’.⁸⁰ Her appearance, though beautiful, is unsettling and is a direct contrast to the Queen’s warm, blonde, blue-eyed appearance. Both women are visually striking, but their beauty is no longer the central moral indicator as it is in the Grimm’s Tale. Instead, beauty operates as an asset that each woman utilises strategically. (Fig. 7)

⁷⁷ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁷⁸ Jeana Jorgensen, “Innocent Initiations: Female Agency in Eroticized Fairy Tales.,” *Marvels & Tales* 22 (no. 1, 2008), pp. 27 – 37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41388856>. Accessed 7th January 2026.

⁷⁹ Jeana Jorgensen, “Innocent Initiations: Female Agency in Eroticized Fairy Tales.,” *Marvels & Tales* 22 (no. 1, 2008), pp. 27 – 37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41388856>. Accessed 7th January 2026

⁸⁰ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

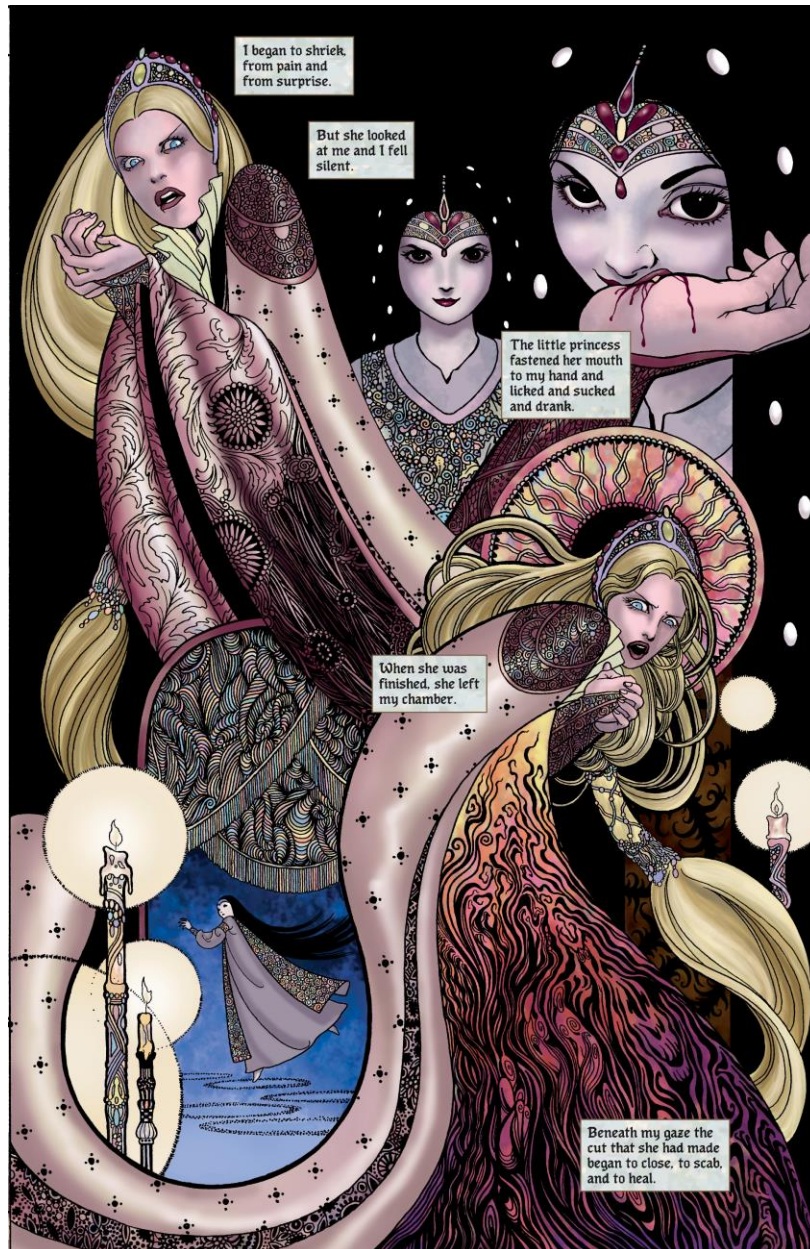


Fig 7: Colleen Doran's 'Snow, Glass, Apples' (1994), depicting the first time Snow White's vampiric nature was revealed to the Queen.

Gaiman does not focus on Queen Regina's beauty but gives her skills and attributes unrelated to physical attractiveness. Before the Queen's marriage, she worked as a fortune teller. 'As a young lass I had worked at the fair...I told fortunes for the fair goers...'.⁸¹ After becoming queen, she says, 'my people claimed that I ruled them with wisdom'⁸² depicting her as a good leader with a compassionate motive rather than one that is driven by envy or vanity. Her wisdom earned her the respect of her community. 'I come to you because you are wise'.⁸³ This reframes the female traditional fairytale villain as a figure of stability and reason. The mirror, a symbol of vanity, is no longer present in the story but appears to be used as a practical tool to locate Snow White and rescue the missing forest creatures. 'You found a lost infant...by staring into that mirror of yours'.⁸⁴ (Fig.8)

⁸¹ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁸² Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁸³ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁸⁴ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.



Fig 8: Colleen Doran's *'Snow, Glass, Apples'* (1994), depicting Queen Regina locating Snow White after many years.

Contrary to the Queen, Snow White in *'Snow, Glass Apples'* utilises her beauty destructively by manipulating, seducing, and preying on men, hiding her violence behind her innocent image. An example of this is seen when she followed a monk, seduced him and 'sank her teeth into his breast'.⁸⁵ Snow Whites seductive ways become dangerous when the Queen encounters a visiting prince. She senses that he may already be under Snow White's dark allure. The Queen fears that if Snow White and the prince were to be wed, Snow White would have all the influence over the kingdom. To save her kingdom, the Queen seduces the prince, motivated only by political gain and not desire or vanity. 'I thought of the alliance of our lands...And in that night, I went to the prince's room'.⁸⁶ In this version, the Queen's beauty becomes a device for securing political stability rather than superficial pride.

It is also important to note how sexual imagery or plot lines are now present in contemporary versions of the fairytales, which the original Grimm's stories, like in *'Rapunzel'*, explicitly removed to maintain the bourgeois values and female purity. In contrast, *'Snow, Glass, Apples'* deliberately foregrounds erotic imagery, which challenges the moral framework presented in the original tales. Donald Haase notes that Jack Zipes argues, that Grimm erased the original folktale's positive references towards sexuality and female empowerment. Which exposed how classical tales came to be "a male creation and projection" that "reflects men's fear of women's sexuality –and of their own as well".⁸⁷ Therefore, the reintroduction of sexuality in modern adaptations moves towards open dialogue about gender, desire, and bodily autonomy, highlighting the changing attitudes regarding sexuality.

Role Reversal

Gaiman's *'Snow, Glass, Apples'* applies an extreme role reversal between the Queen and Snow White character to challenge the original Grimm Brother's traditional moral framework. In the original story, the Queen's primary motive to kill Snow White stems from jealousy and vanity, portraying women as shallow and malevolent for 'living up to patriarchal views of their worth, by

⁸⁵ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁸⁶ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁸⁷ Donald Haase, "Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship: A Critical Survey and Bibliography." *Marvels & Tales* (14, no. 1,2000), pp. 15-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41380741>. Accessed 27th February 2026.

valuing their own beauty'.⁸⁸ In Gaiman's adaptation, this narrative is subverted as the Queen seeks to protect her kingdom and its people from a monstrous Snow White. The Queen's actions were driven by fear and responsibly dismantling the stereotype of the beauty-obsessed ageing woman. Through this role reversal, the now benevolent Queen in this version of Snow White has a positive impact on the kingdom, 'my people claimed that I ruled them with wisdom'.⁸⁹

In the original Grimm's tale, the men in the story were always depicted as noble, rational, and morally steady. Donald Haase explains that 'Fairytale shape our cultural values and understanding of gender roles by invariably depicting women as wicked, beautiful and passive, while portraying men, in absolute contrast, as good, active and heroic.'⁹⁰ However, Gaiman disputes this by revealing the weakness and vulnerabilities in men as well, something that was not present in the Grimm's story. In '*Snow, Glass, Apples*', the male characters are easily manipulated by Snow White's beauty. An example of this is when the prince sees her in a glass coffin and becomes lustful. 'The lust that took him then.'⁹¹ He does not realise that he will be used as a puppet to help Snow White take over the kingdom. Grimm wants 'readers and viewers to conclude that the 'active' female identity represented by the Queen is monstrous and the 'passive' female identity represented by Snow White is natural'.⁹² In contrast, Neil Gaiman's version of Queen's character in '*Snow, Glass, Apples*' reflects modern attitudes to women and challenges gender norms. By changing this narrative, Gaiman shows that the 'active' role of a woman does not need to be 'monstrous' but something noble and righteous.

The ending of '*Snow, Glass, Apples*' mimics the Grimm Brother's finale but aims to reverse the emotional alignment of the reader toward the Queen. In the Grimm's version, the wicked Queen is punished by being forced to dance to her death, whereas in Gaiman's reimagining, the misunderstood Queen is burnt alive by the very kingdom that she tried so desperately to save.

⁸⁸ Veronica L. Schanoes, "Book as Mirror, Mirror as Book: The Significance of the Looking-Glass in Contemporary Revisions of Fairy Tales," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Art* 20 (no. 1 (75) (2009), pp. 5-23.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24352311>. Accessed 10th December 2025.

⁸⁹ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁹⁰ Donald Haase, "*Feminist Fairy-Tale Scholarship: A Critical Survey and Bibliography.*" *Marvels & Tales* (14, no. 1, 2000), pp. 15-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41380741>. Accessed 10th December 2025.

⁹¹ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁹² Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale*, (Oxford United Kingdom, Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p.140 - 142

‘Outside they are singing and cheering and banging on the side of the kiln’.⁹³ Preserving the ruthless punishment of the original tale emphasises the disproportionate cruelty lodged in Grimm’s tale. In both versions of Snow Whites, though written years apart, there is a ‘happy ending’. It can be assumed that this means marriage and a kingdom for the well-behaved. Even though Gaiman’s Snow White was not well behaved, she was favoured in the end for returning to the traditional standard of life for women, like in the 19th-century version, by announcing her marriage to the prince. Whereas the Queen, is portrayed as aged and subsequently ‘weaker’ than the youthful Snow White at the end of the tale. Snow White in Grimms story ‘does not decide autonomously’ how the Queen should be punished, but rather ‘remains a witness’.⁹⁴

⁹³ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁹⁴ Lisa Rettl, “Fairy Tales Re-Visited Gender Concepts in Traditional and Feminist Fairy Tales.” *AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik* 26 (no. 2, 2001), pp. 181–98. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43025615>. Accessed 10th December 2025



Fig 9: Colleen Doran's 'Snow, Glass, Apples' (1994), depicting the Queen's execution and Snow White's takeover of the kingdom.

The story concludes with the Queen's execution, burnt alive by the very people she once ruled. 'The goose-grease begins to melt and glisten upon my skin.'⁹⁵ This bitter ending presents a world where moral certainty collapses, and evil prevails.⁹⁶ Gaiman's reversal gives autonomy and motive to his reimagining of Snow White, as this begs the question: if Grimm's Snow White is truly kind-hearted, why would she accept such a cruel fate for the Queen? It is because she trusts the male authorities in her life, as shown throughout the story and truly believes the moral framework that evil deserves to be punished. (Fig. 9)

Role reversal as a tool within traditional fairy tales highlights how gender roles and life have changed from the 19th century to the 21st century. Dijana Vučković explains, in many fairy tales, the female protagonist's happiness is mostly reliant on marriage, beauty and obedience; 'on the other hand, male characters are brave, capable and determined'.⁹⁷ The use of role reversal in contemporary adaptations helps to question gender norms and reevaluate power structures, which help unveil how fairytales continue to evolve in response to changing social and cultural understandings of gender.

3.3 Conclusion: Snow White and Its Varying Interpretations

Reflecting on Contemporary Issues in a Modern World

This chapter demonstrates how metaphor and morale can be subverted and built on through changing a classic, familiar tale to challenge the conventional dichotomy of passive beauty versus the active female through role reversal in Neil Gaiman's *'Snow, Glass, Apples'*. This version of the story presents an alternative perspective where we recognise female power and autonomy, also reflective of the changes within gender roles of the 21st century. In Gaiman's story, the boundaries between good and evil are blurred, unlike the distinct codes of good and evil in the original version of the story. This change presents themes of beauty, agency, sexuality, and desire in a transparent and complex way, which the traditional fairy tales oversimplified. Women are either demonised

⁹⁵ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019), Unpaginated.

⁹⁶ Neil Gaiman, *Snow, Glass, Apples* (US, Great Britain, Dark Horse Books, Dark Horse Comics LLC, Headline Publishing Group, 2019) Blub

⁹⁷ Vučković, Dijana. "Reversed Gender Roles in Folk Tales: Stories to be Read for Education Purposes: Is the Magic Mirror of Beauty Reserved Exclusively for Female Characters in Fairy Tales?" *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 32, no. 2 (2023): p. 118. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jms.2023.a960936>. Accessed 7th January 2026

or idealised depending on how they conform to social expectations in the Grimm's tale. This, however, was a result of following a moral code at the time. Gaiman confronts this concept in his reimagining of Snow White and the Queen by bringing forth themes of autonomy, moral ambiguity, and the problematic consequences of restricting women to a refined role. Gaiman uses the familiarity of the story of 'Snow White' as a template to add layers of moral ambiguity and gendered critique, providing a context through which readers can question assumptions about innocence, good and evil, and the role of women in fairy tales.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has analysed how society affects storytelling and how, as life changes, the stories adapt with it. What are the morals of the stories in Grimm's fairytales? Why did they change them? How do they manifest in our society today? These are the questions that are analysed to understand our evolving society.

Fairytales on the surface appear as stories for children to escape into a world of fantasy. However, it is evident that fairytales have long been used for many different purposes in our society. They first appeared as folklore spread to generations through word of mouth until eventually being collected by story collectors like the Brother's Grimm who compiled the tales into books for everyone to read. The tales originally collected contained graphic and sexual storylines, for example, in the first edition of *'Rapunzel'* 1812;⁹⁸ the protagonist is impregnated out of wed lock. In later revisions in 1819, this element is non-existent. Analysing the fairytales shows the contrast between the earlier versions and the revised versions, which show significant changes. This makes one wonder, why did they do this?

During the 19th century the middle class was growing, and they wanted suitable reading material for their children; material which helped to guide them on the right path. The Grimms made these changes to ensure the tales were fit for a middle-class audience according to their moral values which stemmed from their Christian conservative beliefs. The stories were used to help teach children about what is good and what is evil. They were also used to socialize people into gender roles by making the characters as examples for children to learn from. Sometimes fairytales also provided a sense of escapism for the audience to have certain freedoms that they couldn't have in the 19th century. The aim of the first chapter is to show why and how these ideas came about and how they started to manifest into the stories.

To further investigate how the revised fairytales were used to socialize people's behaviour, an analysis of *'Snow White'* 1857⁹⁹ was conducted in chapter two. Snow White was chosen to be

⁹⁸ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Jack Zipes, Dezö Andrea, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015), xxxvii

⁹⁹ Jacob, Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes (trans.), John B. Gruelle (illus.) (Toronto; New York, N.Y. : Bantam, 1987) p.197

the main case study because this story illustrates the moral framework in which Grimm's fairytales operated. This is evident through the characterization of the protagonist Snow White and how her behaviour differs from the Evil Queen. The research concludes that Snow White presents the ideal woman for the standards of the 19th century. She is beautiful with desirable features like 'skin as white as snow' and obeys the rules given to her by the seven dwarves and the prince. The Queen, however, is the opposite of Snow white, represented as an ageing woman who is driven mad by jealousy. Her role as an active female, leads her to punishment while Snow White's beauty, youth and subservience to the male order lead her to have a happily ever after. Male characters in fairytales are often portrayed as compassionate, strong and brave, who are often depicted as leaders. This is clear in Snow White's story as her fate is dependent on the male figures in her life. This distinction in roles is analysed to prove that there are certain agendas the story is trying to portray to the audience that is in line with the moral code of the time.

Analysing the original tale of Snow White creates a foundation to analyse contemporary adaptations in the 21st century. Neil Gaiman's *'Snow, Glass, Apples'* has written an alternative version of the story where the Queen is good and wants to rule her kingdom with her wisdom while Snow White is actively trying to destroy the kingdom and take down the Queen. In the two previous chapters, there was an exploration of how traditional fairytales like Snow White fit into the moral framework of society at the time. This time, we explored how historically familiar stories can be altered to fit the morals of the 21st century and how giving female characters more agency changes the dynamic of the story. This story presents a very complex nuanced take which shows female power through Queen Regina's wisdom and Snow White's manipulative behaviours. Beauty manifests as a tool for both women, which they use strategically to gain power. Since this story is a dark gothic retelling, it contains elements like sexual desire which traditional fairytales tried to erase and not confront. This tells us that as a society we have evolved a long way from the 19th century, though the ending of the Queen's violent execution suggests that even within the modern retelling, there are anxieties surrounding female authority and sexuality that remain deeply embedded in cultural storytelling.

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