

## Gender Performativity in Grimm's Fairy Tale: 'Little Snow-White'

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### **Abstract:**

This research paper delves into the intricate dynamics of gender performativity within the classic Grimm Brothers' fairy tale, 'Little Snow-White.' Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the study critically examines how the characters in the narrative engage in and challenge traditional gender roles, offering a nuanced exploration of the societal constructs and expectations embedded in the fairy tale.

The analysis begins by contextualizing 'Little Snow-White' within the broader genre of fairy tales and elucidating the socio-cultural milieu during the Grimm Brothers' era. Through a close reading of the text, the paper identifies instances where characters, particularly the protagonist Snow White and the Queen, perform and subvert gender norms. By employing Butler's theoretical framework, the study explores how these performances contribute to the construction and deconstruction of gender identity in the narrative.

Furthermore, the research scrutinizes the implications of gender performativity on power dynamics, agency, and the characters' interactions. It investigates how 'Little Snow-White' reflects and challenges prevailing notions of femininity and masculinity, shedding light on the transformative potential inherent in narrative storytelling to shape and reshape societal perceptions of gender roles.

In conclusion, this paper contributes to the broader discourse on fairy tales and gender studies by offering a nuanced analysis of 'Little Snow-White.' By applying Butler's concept of performativity, the study provides fresh insights into the ways in which traditional narratives can serve as sites of both reinforcement and subversion of gender norms, fostering a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural implications embedded in these timeless stories.

**Key Words:** Gender identity, Gender Performativity, Fairy tale, 'Snow White and the seven Dwarfs', Stereotype

*“It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.....”* ~Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Gender Performativity Theory**

Judith Butler, a renowned American philosopher and gender theorist, introduced the concept of "gender performativity" in her influential book "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" in 1990. This idea discusses the capacity to embody a specific gender or individual identity, rather than being seen or treated as an object for others to see or interact with. Judith Butler's gender performativity theory aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that "One is not inherently a woman, but rather becomes one." Judith Butler emphasised the significance of gender as a crucial element of both individual identity and the social fabric. She argued that society plays a pivotal part in developing one's gender identity. Judith Butler asserts that gender is established as an identity through the repeated performance of actions. The idea aims to elucidate the process of distinguishing tasks and responsibilities based on gender, and how these elements subsequently shape one's gender identity. They do not deny the existence of anatomical differences, but rather argue that gender identity is mostly shaped by societal duties and standards.

### **1.2 Grimm’s Fairy Tales**

The first volume of the Fairy Tale was published as ‘*Kinder-und Hausmärchen (Children’ and Household Tales – commonly known as Grimm’s Fairy Tales)*’ was published in the year 1812 and it included 86 folktales. The Grimm’s brothers developed a passion for folktales at a very young age and started collecting stories. *Grimm’s Fairy Tales* can be considered as a genuine effort to preserve the folk tales for the future generation. The folk tales existed in the oral form and it was natural that the story changed each time it was told. The advent of technology and Industrialization was taking people away from the social gatherings and culture. The collection of the folk/fairy tales ensured that they will not be lost with time. There are many versions of the folktales and recording them gave one concrete version that can be referred to for the generations to come.

### **1.3 Little Snow-White**

The story was originally named 'Little Snow-White' and was the 53rd tale in the anthology initially released by the Grimm brothers in 1812. The narrative was transformed into a film entitled 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', and this appellation has since become the universally recognised designation for the tale. The narrative commences with the Queen expressing her desire for a daughter who possesses the qualities of being "as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as

the wood in this frame." Her desire was fulfilled and shortly thereafter she delivered a wonderful baby girl. Regrettably, she passed away following the delivery of the child. The King weds a stunning woman characterised as 'haughty and conceited'. She displays narcissistic tendencies and uses her enchanted mirror to validate her own beauty. Upon the magical mirror proclaiming Snow-White as the epitome of beauty, the new Queen's malevolent nature becomes evident. She takes every conceivable measure to achieve her complete eradication from existence, as she is perceived as a menace. The fairy tale depicts Snow-white as the archetypal damsel in distress, with the seven dwarfs coming to her aid.

## **2.0 Review of Literature**

- In the paper title, 'Women in Fairy Tales: 'Snow White' and the Insidious Power of Gender Stereotypes' by Ellie Wriglesworth in 'Arts & Culture', she states that the fairy tales have endured because of their magical power and states that in most cases it is not a realistic reflection of reality. Women are not portrayed as they really are.
- In their analysis of the mirror in 'Snow White', Gilbert and Gubar state that 'To be caught and trapped in a mirror is to be driven inwards, obsessively studying self-images' and this reference of being lost in the image can be seen in Snow white.
- Anders state in the paper 'Traditional Female Gender Roles in "Snow White"' throw light on the traditional gender roles attributed to women and how women accept these roles and thrive to be live up to the expectations set by society.
- In 'Feminisney: "Snow White" — First and Worst', Sean Randall questions the concept of 'love's first kiss' when the Prince is ready to kiss a girl who is sleeping when they are strangers.
- In the research work 'The emancipation of 'Snow White' in fairy-tale criticism and fairy-tale retellings', Vanessa Joosen describes how feminist criticism has helped in analyzing and interpreting Grimms tales from the feminist perspective and understand the gender agenda
- In the article 'Snow White is No Feminist' by Janet Maslin that was published in 'The New York Times' she states that Snow white "exists only to be victimized by her wicked stepmother - a far more interesting character - and to wait for Mr. Right."

## **3.0 Analysis**

Fairy tales have been widely disseminated across various regions of the world, captivating and influencing multiple generations. It is crucial that we examine these works in order to determine the impact they have on the impressionable brains of children. During the formative age, children are highly impressionable, and anything they hear or witness during this period can have a long-lasting influence on their life. Fairy tales are extensively consumed and adored by children of all ages. This paper aims to examine the narrative of 'Snow White' through the lens of Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. It is a valid statement that we must mature in order to comprehend fairytales from a new perspective. Examining the narrative of Snow White through the lens of gender performativity theory raises numerous thought-provoking inquiries for debate.

### **3.1 The portrayal of women in the fairy tales**

The women described in the fairy tales can be basically classified into two categories – the damsel in distress or the witch/stepmother who should be killed. The portrayal of women in the fairy tales has helped to bring about the way women are seen or described in the society. In a way it has led to the gender stereotyping. This paper tries to analyze the two prominent women characters in 'Little Snow-White': Snow-white who is the titular hero and adheres to the requirements of the gender and the other character is the step mother who is described as the epitome of jealousy and wickedness.

Judith Butler stated that it is the performative repetition that describes the roles set forth for either gender. In 'Little Snow-white' we see the character of Snow-white as the beautiful girl who has no choice of her own. This repetitive description of the lead female character and the beautiful damsel in distress has led to the stereotyping of women and others are expected to follow the standards set. The character of Snow-white and her step mother might be far from reality but the repetitive portrayal of women in this manner has created that image in the society and generations that follow are expected to adhere to the norms. The characterization of the Step-mother also creates the image that women, when given power take wrong decisions.

### **3.2 The roles assigned to women**

#### **Beauty**

The concept of beauty plays a very important role in the story. The idea of beauty and the need to be the most beautiful is the background of the story. The step-mother is introduced as a very beautiful character but she relies on external affirmation for her happiness. 'The Mirror' is the world for the Step-mother and her longing for appreciation and praise can be seen. It was the definition put forward by society that women should be beautiful and presentable at all times that indirectly lead to the flaw in her character. The Step-mother can be seen as an exaggerated

character but we still come across many characters who crave for praise and attention. The flaw sees its epitome when she not able to accept the fact that a little child is more beautiful than her. The Step-mother is ready to kill the child to ensure that she remains the most beautiful peron in the World. Snow-white is also seen as a beautiful child who tries to ensure that she is always presentable and beautiful.

## **Obedient**

In the depiction of Snow-White's character, we see numerous moments where she is shown as a compliant and submissive young girl. She is prepared to attentively heed the instructions of her step-mother or the dwarfs without raising any objections. Furthermore, this gender role expectation entailed denying women access to education and confining them to a state of perpetual obedience. They were attuned to attentively listen and obediently follow any instructions given to them. In the last scene, Snow-white is shown as the exquisite princess who willingly succumbs to the charming prince, being placed on a horse and escorted to the prince's castle, where it is likely that further cleaning tasks await her. She has no objections to the scenario or the actions that will determine the course of her life.

Snow-White is characterised as a girl who derives pleasure from domestic tasks. Despite her royal status as the Princess, she expresses no grievances. Derives pleasure from domestic tasks and willingly engages in cleaning and cooking within the dwarfs' abode, without requiring any prompting or expressing any grievances. She is depicted as the epitome of femininity - stunning, compliant, a helpless maiden in need of rescue, finds pleasure in domestic tasks, and refrains from questioning.

## **Power**

Women are sometimes depicted either as the vulnerable and defenceless Damsel in distress or as the ambitious and ruthless lady who will do anything to maintain her power and dominance. This depiction, albeit diverging from reality, aligns with the societal expectations. This depiction also fosters the notion that women should possess physical attractiveness and depend on others to make decisions and assist them in times of trouble. This depiction also implies that women are incapable of managing power without becoming consumed by it, as exemplified by the Step-mother's enthrallment with the commanding words of the mirror.

## **4.1 Conclusion**

Judith Butler's Gender performativity theory, as presented in her book 'Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity', remains highly pertinent. It elucidates that gender roles are defined

by the repetitive enactment of specific behaviours. Snow White exemplifies the conventional adherence to her assigned gender role. She lacks agency and exhibits a passive approach towards making decisions and exerting control over her own life. She possesses remarkable beauty and derives pleasure from performing the daily tasks within the dwelling of the dwarfs. Fairy tales have a broad readership and exert a significant influence on societal perceptions of women.

The article, 'The issue with Snow White, and the lessons Scandinavia offers,' highlights the importance of adopting a more realistic approach when reading stories to children. It emphasises the significance of exposing children to realistic narratives in order to foster a genuine understanding of gender identity as they grow older. If gender roles are determined by the actions that individuals of a particular gender consistently engage in, then it is necessary for us to revise fairy tales with a more accurate perspective. Women are neither helpless individuals in need of rescue, nor are they excessively ambitious or malicious. Women possess the ability to make decisions and possess a distinct sense of self that extends beyond their physical attractiveness and feelings of envy. To prevent the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, it is important to expose children to narratives that accurately depict the various and authentic aspects of the world they inhabit. It is imperative that we transcend traditional gender norms and adopt a more comprehensive perspective.

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