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Dr. Whiten, “Snow White,” and the Unresponsive Boys

“It’s almost eight o’clock.” Dr. Cindy B. Whiten thought to herself as she anxiously stared at the clock, flipping through her binder of lesson plans for the tenth time. She had been waiting eight years to teach a class like this; her nerves were getting to her. After receiving her doctorate in literature and philosophy from Stanford University, she moved to North Carolina to teach at a prestigious boarding school. Two short, albeit successful, years later she was offered a position at Duke. Here, she was to a course dealing with feminism and its prevalence in fairytales.

It was the first day of the spring semester, and class was scheduled to start in five minutes. But to Dr. Whiten’s surprise the small auditorium was empty. As the clock approached eight, the students began sluggishly filing in. She was taken aback to see the majority of the students wearing grungy sweatpants and sweatshirts, looking as if they had just rolled out of bed. She noticed one man in particular who looked like he had an awfully rough weekend. A few of the students bravely sat in front, but most chose seats as far from the professor as possible. This was most likely an attempt to avoid any question directed their way.

“Ha! typical!” She thought.

“Good morning scholars! My name is Dr. Whit--” she was interrupted as a student flung open the door and scrambled into the auditorium. With a look of embarrassment on his face, he quietly sat in the front row. Once he was seated, the professor continued her introduction.

“As I was saying,” she gave a **petulant** glare to the tardy boy, “my name is Dr. Whiten and welcome to Fairy Tales through the Eyes of a Feminist. I see we have a very male dominated class. This will make today’s lesson, and the rest of the semester, very interesting. Today, we will start things off slowly, analyzing the Grimm Brothers version of ‘Snow White’ through the eyes of feminist theory.”

“We will begin class today discussing the basics of the feminist theory. Would anybody be willing to give me a brief summary of what you know about feminism!?” asked Dr. Whiten excitedly.

The unresponsive class sat silently. “What do I do? They are supposed to be engaged by my lecture, not sitting there like idiots,” thought Dr. Whiten nervously.

“Well as you are all intelligent scholars, you should know that according to X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, authors of the book *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, feminist criticism scrutinizes the relationship sexual identity has in the writing and interpreting of literary works. Most feminist critics feel that literature is unfairly male dominated. This is a result of our **patriarchal** society which aids in creating a power imbalance, forcing women to use manipulation, not knowledge, to get what they want (Kennedy and Gioia 1959). Ann B. Dobie, author of *Theory into Practice an Introduction to Literary Criticism* and professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, noted that all of these things give women a sense of inferiority to men, which, according to feminist critics, is the main issue in society and literature (Dobie 98-99).

“There are three main factions of feminist theory. Would anybody be willing to venture a guess as to what these three factions are?” questioned Dr. Whiten.

Once again, the class was silent.

“Okay gentlemen, I know that it is a Monday morning but I need a response! You, with the brown sweatshirt, what are the three main divisions of feminist theory?” asked Dr. Whiten angrily.

“Uhhhh...radical, moderate, and conservative?” the man in the brown sweatshirt answered skeptically.

“Well I appreciate your courage, but no. The three main factions of feminist theory are American, British, and French. According to Ross C. Murfin, author of *Hamlet: William Shakespeare* and professor of English at the University of Miami, American feminists are unique in that they analyze literature without thinking about the abstract concept of language (Murfin 210). The biggest concern of the American faction of feminism is to urge writers, both male and female, to accurately portray the woman’s life and thoughts. They do not want women to seem overly angelic or devilish; they believe that women should be portrayed as realistically as possible (Dobie 100).

“The second division of the feminist theory comes from the British. The primary goal of the British feminist movement is to change the economic and social status of women. Many see British feminists as having ideals very closely related to that of Marxists (Dobie 100). As a result of their Marxist ideals, they often overemphasize historical texts that they believe can influence women to make dramatic social changes. On the other hand, many feel that they do not put enough emphasis on women’s influence in art and culture, but this is heavily debated (Murfin 212). The final faction of feminist theory comes to us from the French. The French

feminist movement is viewed as highly psychoanalytic, as it deals primarily with language and how it is used (Dobie 100).

In the back, a hand shot up, “Finally! Some action! Yes young man, what do you have to add to this discussion, and please, get your feet off the back of the chair?” Dr. Whiten said to him.

Rolling his eyes the man placed his feet silently on the ground, “I don’t really have anything to add, it’s just a question. Isn’t psychoanalytic junk all about like, penises and sex and stuff like that?” The class burst out into laughter, and rounds of high fives were given.

“Good lord, what have I gotten myself into?” She asked herself.

“Yes sir it is, but that is not at all what we are talking about! Let’s get back on track.” Dr. Whiten said in an attempt to **quell** the rowdy students.

“Where was I? Oh yes! The French division of feminism believes that language is overly male dominated, promoting masculine ideals throughout society. Their solution to this problem is to create a feminine language, which would be much more emotional and realistic than the language and diction that we are accustomed to seeing in popular literature (Murfin 209-210).

“Well, there you have the three divisions of feminism. Now we will discuss some of the similarities of the three. All feminists want to further education in women through reading and writing, define the female experience in literature and society; and expose our overly patriarchal society (Dobie 108-109). Feminist critics have offered two different methods to accomplish these goals. The first is through the woman as a reader. They want women to read and criticize male produced literature, challenging common stereotypes and misconceptions. The other option is through writing. Women are urged by feminists to create literary works that

incorporate the feminine language and illustrate themes that exemplify the power women are capable of holding (Kennedy and Gioia 1960).

“I know that was a lot of information, but we’ll move on to something lighter, a recap of the story ‘Snow White’ as told by the infamous Grimm Brothers. Snow White was an adolescent princess who lived with her evil stepmother, who was also the queen (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 82). Everyday, the queen would ask her magic mirror a question. Can anyone tell me what she would ask?”

The room was silent once again, with the exception of the occasional squeak of a chair. After seeing the embarrassment that the previously questioned student faced, the other students slouched down in their chairs, in an attempt to avoid the glance of the professor.

“Okay, well that should not surprise me. We’ll blame your silence on the weekend, but I do expect more participation during our next class.” Dr. Whiten thought aloud.

“The queen would ask her mirror, ‘Mirror, mirror; on the wall, Who’s the fairest one of all?’ (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 82). One particular morning, the queen asked her magic mirror this same question, but she received a startling reply. The mirror said, ‘My Queen, you may be the fairest here, But Snow White is a thousand times more fair’ (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 83). This made the queen extremely jealous, and she ordered for the killing of Snow White. Snow White escaped into the forest. As she was wandering, she came upon a small cottage. She entered the cottage to take a nap (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 84-85). When she awoke, she found seven dwarfs. The dwarfs decided to allow her to stay, but only if she kept the house clean and orderly, cooked their meals, and washed their clothes (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 87).

“Meanwhile, the queen was living under the superstition that Snow White was dead. The following morning, she asked her magic mirror the same question as the previous day. This

time, the mirror replied, 'Here you're the fairest, my dear Queen, But Little Snow White, who plans to stay With the seven dwarfs so far away, Is now the fairest ever seen' (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 87). The queen was outraged and vowed to kill her stepdaughter. After two attempts, she succeeded in killing the beautiful Snow White (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 91).

“Back at the cottage, the dwarfs put Snow White in a glass coffin and placed her atop a mountain. As they were mourning, a prince arrived and asked to buy the coffin. The dwarfs, seeing his admiration for her beauty, gave him the coffin. As they were beginning to leave, Snow White awoke. When the prince saw this, he exclaimed, 'I love you more than anything else on earth [...] Come with me to my father's castle. You shall be my bride' (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 93). The queen fell into dread and died, while, of course, Snow White and the prince lived happily ever after” (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 94).

Looking around the room, the professor noticed many heavy eyelids. The student who arrived late to class was slumped over his textbook fast asleep. The professor walked over to his desk with her binder of lesson plans and dropped them on his desk. He awoke, and once he realized what had happened, his face turned bright red. The other students snickered nervously, and the professor as she sauntered back up to the front of the small auditorium with newfound courage.

“Now that I have your attention, we can start the analysis.” Dr. Whiten said excitedly. “In this book, there are many different examples for each of the three parts of the feminist theory. We will begin with the American feminist theory. Can anyone apply this aspect of feminism to the story?”

As usual, the room was silent. “Okay, how about I give you a hint? It centers on Snow White as a character. Can anyone elaborate on this?” Dr. Whiten asked skeptically.

One man in the center of the room started to speak, “Well, I think that it has to do with the overly angelic and innocent portrayal of Snow White. The Grimm Brothers do this through her personality and her appearance.”

Dr. Whiten exclaimed, “Very good! Now, I will elaborate on this idea. First of all, the name choice of Snow White automatically gives her an angelic-like quality (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 81). White is seen as the most pure and virginal color. According to American feminists, the reader would instantly see Snow White as being overly saintly which is not accurate to the personality of the common woman (Dobie 100). They would urge the Grimm Brothers to choose a color with less significance, something that is ordinary, giving Snow White the most realistic portrayal. In the past, men have viewed pure women as the most ideal candidates for marriage. By making Snow White pure, the Grimm Brothers are ultimately making her an object for men to possess, not a strong-willed protagonist.

“Now we can move on to the British faction of feminist theory. The ideas from this theory can best be applied when reevaluating the agreement made between Snow White and the dwarfs when she first arrives at their cottage. She is told that she may stay in their cottage as long as she does all of their housework and cooking (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 87). This faction of feminism would have a huge problem with this agreement, as they aim to change the economic and social status of women (Dobie 100). They would say that by agreeing to this, Snow White is accepting her inferiority in society. In addition, this is inadvertently preparing her for marriage and childbearing, which follows the common standards for women in society.

A hand in the back right corner of the auditorium shot up. Dr. Whiten nodded toward the student, and the student said, “But what about the comments the prince makes when Snow White

finally wakes up? When you were retelling the story, this seemed very important. But you haven't mentioned it, what up yo?"

Dr. Whiten rolled her eyes and said, "Well I appreciate your participation but be patient! I was just about to address that scene. The French feminist groups would have the biggest issues with this piece of the story. As you recall the prince said, "You will stay with me [. . .] I love you more than anything else on earth [. . .] Come with me to my father's castle. You shall be my bride" (J. Grimm and W. Grimm 93). The **diction** used by the Grimm Brothers clearly shows Snow White's inferiority to the prince. For example, the prince demands that Snow White shall be his bride. He neglects to ask her if she wants to marry him. By choosing the phrase "my bride," the prince is suggesting ownership of Snow White. A French feminist would advocate for a more emotional proposal, one that included the thoughts of both Snow White and the prince (Murfin 209).

"Now that we have covered the three types of feminist theory, we are going to analyze the overall theme of the story, which is beauty. The idea of beauty is **ubiquitous** throughout 'Snow White.' The Queen is obsessed with her own beauty which drives her hate for Snow White. The underlying reason for her hate is the fear of her beauty being surpassed. In society, beauty is a critical part of a woman's survival. Therefore, the most beautiful woman would be the most likely to get a man and, ultimately, a thriving marriage. As marriage is society's ultimate goal for women, beauty must also become a woman's priority."

Dr. Whiten looked at the clock. There was still twenty minutes left of class. The students were falling asleep, even the ones in the front row.

"What am I supposed to do? I can't keep them awake for an entire lecture!" She thought nervously.

“Okay! Since you can’t seem to stay awake we will have a quick re-cap.” All eyes in the room opened up and stared blankly at Dr. Whiten.

“Can anyone tell me what the differences are between the American, British, and French feminist theory?” Dr. Whiten asked.

Several students raised their hands. “You, in the hat,” she called out to him.

“Uhhhh...American’s are the ones who think women need some realistic representation. The British wanna to change women’s economic status, and the Frenchies are all about emotion.”

Dr. Whiten was shocked! “What a thorough response. Maybe they were listening after all!” Dr Whiten said to herself.

“Very good! Well done sir!” Dr. Whiten exclaimed. “Now can anyone tell me what the Grimm Brothers ‘Snow White’ is about?”

Again, several hands flew into the air. This time she called on a man who she knew had been sleeping the entire class period.

“Snow White is about some chick who goes into the woods cause her mom wants to kill her. She meets these seven short guys who let her live with them. Then, the mom finds out she ain’t dead so she tries to kill her a few more times. Snow White dies. Then the prince kisses her, waking her up, the end.”

“You’re an idiot,” the man next to him said. “That’s not how she wakes up! As he was walking away, she just kinda woke up!”

“Yes, very good Mr...” Dr. Whiten looks at her class list, “Mr. Charming. I’m glad to see that someone was listening to my lecture. Just one last thing, then you all may go continue your

naps in your rooms. Can anyone give us a short summary of my feminist analysis of the Grimm Brother's 'Snow White?'"

Like in the beginning of class, the room was silent. "Well, if their not willing to give me a summary then we can have a pop quiz next class." Dr. Whiten thought.

She began to pack up her things. "Now I hope all of you were thoroughly paying attention, and I would suggest that you review your notes for our next meeting." She said with a secretive smirk. She slung her bag over her shoulder and began to saunter out of the auditorium. Once she got to the door, she looked back at the confused faces and said, "Have a nice day gentleman."

Works Cited

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