

Images in the Mirror: Reflecting/Refracting the Beauty Myth in Snow White

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Abstract

The story of the mirror predates recorded history. From the earliest times the mirror has functioned as an important though ambiguous source of insight into the human culture and besides its practical use in our everyday life as well as its scientific applications, the mirror has evolved as a complex concept invoking and subverting certain fundamental discourses on knowledge and perception, cultural inscriptions, human subjectivity, representation and aesthetics. Not only has the mutable socio-cultural milieu transformed the concrete form of the mirror but the inherently elusive character of the mirror has resulted in its metamorphosis into a polysemic metaphor for human identity and self-knowledge. In its metaphorical capacity, the mirror simultaneously reflects, reveals, represents and, refracts the obvious and the hidden; it embodies the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious codes of meaning surrounding the 'self' and 'identity' in the realms of literature, history, art, philosophy, magic, theology and politics, among others. The mirror has been viewed in literature and philosophy in myriad ways. Besides serving as a mode of re-presentation, imagination as well as a doorway to access time past, future and parallel; the mirror in literature has, interestingly, functioned to reflect/represent and unravel /subvert the myth of beauty as constituted and perpetuated in our socio-cultural matrix. One such intriguing 'literary' mirror is the talking mirror in the popular fairy tale *Snow White*. This paper attempts to examine how the mirror in *Snow White* paradoxically reflects and refracts the compulsive pursuit, particularly by women, of mythical parameters of beauty formulated and imposed to perpetuate and preserve patriarchal power politics.

Key words: mirror, representation, Snow White, beauty, self, identity, patriarchal, power politics

Meanwhile Snow White held court,
Her china-blue doll eyes open and shut
And sometimes referring to her mirror as women do.
Anne Sexton¹

The story of the mirror predates recorded history. The first mirror available to the most primitive human inhabitants of the world was, perhaps, the reflective surface of an unruffled pool of water while, the first known (wo) man-made mirror dates from 6200 BCE.² The 'material' history of the (wo)

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man-made mirror began with rounded mirrors of metal such as copper, bronze, gold and silver which eventually led to the invention of large, flat glass mirrors. From the earliest times, the mirror has functioned as an important though ambiguous source of insight into the human culture and besides its practical use in our everyday life as well as its scientific applications, the mirror has evolved as a complex concept invoking and subverting certain fundamental discourses on knowledge and perception, cultural inscriptions, human subjectivity, representation and aesthetics. Not only has the mutable socio-cultural milieu transformed the concrete form of the mirror but also the inherently elusive character of the mirror has resulted in its metamorphosis into a polysemic metaphor for human identity and self-knowledge. In its metaphorical capacity, the mirror simultaneously reflects, reveals, represents and, refracts the obvious and the hidden; it embodies the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious codes of meaning surrounding the 'self' and 'identity' in the realms of literature, history, art, philosophy, magic, theology and politics, among others. The mirror has been viewed in literature and philosophy in myriad ways. According to the Platonic view, the mirror is slavishly imitative and provides mere sight not insight. The medieval belief focuses on the supernatural powers of the mirror to reflect a hidden, superior reality, divine abstractions or even the image of God. The early Renaissance optimism upheld the mirror's receptivity as a guide to the self in a world fascinated with corporeal beauty while, the view that the mirror functions as the permeable, magical window to alternative worlds and realities existing parallel to the lived world gained popularity particularly due to the Victorian writer, Lewis Carroll's magic mirror. By the turn of the 20th century we witnessed the mirror evolve as a symbol of the enigma, horror and absurdity of the human condition. Besides serving as a mode of representation, imagination as well as a doorway to access time past, future and parallel; the mirror in literature has, interestingly, functioned to reflect/represent and unravel/subvert the myth of beauty as constituted and perpetuated in our socio-cultural matrix.

One such intriguing 'literary' mirror is the talking mirror in the popular fairy tale *Snow White* which paradoxically reflects and refracts the compulsive pursuit, particularly by women, of mythical parameters of beauty formulated and imposed to perpetuate and preserve the patriarchal ideology. In *Snow White*,³ a popular 19th century German fairy tale first

published in 1812 by the Brothers Grimm, a beautiful woman, who marries a King to become his second wife and the stepmother of his daughter named Snow White, possesses a talking magic mirror; in front of it she asks each morning: 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall/Who in this land is fairest of all?' Until Snow White grew up, the mirror always answered: 'You, my queen, are fairest of all.' The answer would please her as she took immense pride in her beauty and knew the mirror always spoke the truth. The beauty of Snow White, however, eventually surpassed hers. Unable to accept it, she would order a huntsman to kill Snow White and bring her lungs and liver to the queen as proof. The rest of the tale deals with how the huntsman spares Snow White's life, her meeting with the seven dwarfs, the queen's discovery that Snow White has survived and her subsequent attempts to kill Snow White. The tale culminates in Snow White's marriage to a prince and the punishment of the queen who is forced to step into red-hot iron shoes and dance until she falls down dead.

In an apparently simple tale of goodness and evil, reward and punishment, but lurking behind its facile façade are implications which reach the subterranean level of the tale to unmask how the concept of beauty is culturally generated and marketed as a vital tool of power politics. Foucault states: 'the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.'⁴ Beauty thus, inextricably linked to body image, is both conceptualised by the power relations and qualify these relations. In the context of Snow White, this contradictory character and praxis of beauty can be understood through the queen's magic mirror. Looking into a mirror is intricately linked to desire and perception constituting the values/parameters established and expected within a certain socio-cultural context. Similar to the Mirror of Erised in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels which reflects 'the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts,'⁵ the queen's magic mirror initially reflects and represents through, image and words, her desire to be the most beautiful. Her subjective desire for a certain kind of appearance and body is structured by her perception of beauty, which, in turn, is shaped by patriarchal codes of beauty, particular to her immediate socio-cultural-historical context —'fairest of all'— but also possessing a sort of universal resonance across time and space. The cultural perception of beauty internalised within her invests her with a delusional

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sense of power and accomplishment, lending to her desire an obsession akin to the mythological Narcissus. Her self-delusional obsession, however, carry the seeds of her insecurity, evident by her repeated need for reassurance from the mirror. It betrays her desperate desire to conform to the societal construct of beauty. In the process, she unconsciously becomes a pawn of power politics, an effective embodiment of patriarchal prescriptions. ‘...the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements, and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organized, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use neither of weapons nor of terror and yet remain of a physical order.’⁶ The myth of beauty conceptualised by the structures of power becomes a powerful tool of such subjection through its legitimization in the queen’s desire.

However, mirrors have the mysterious ability to lead to reality through illusions. The queen’s magic mirror would soon begin to refract and subvert the queen’s false sense of power by replacing her image with that of Snow White and declare ‘You, my queen, are fair; it is true. But Snow-White is a thousand times fairer than you.’ The queen’s latent insecurity would resurface in the form of palpable fear. Her envy and subsequent stratagems to kill Snow White point at how the unwarranted strain and psychophysiological constraints of the societal expectations of beauty/body image strategically ritualised and then, assimilated within an individual’s subconscious to become an unconscious practice, has deep-seated, permanently damaging psychological implications. The excesses committed by the queen go beyond being interpreted as acts of evil. They are fraught with a semantic complexity, which is difficult to untangle. In some textual variations and cinematic adaptation of *Snow White*, as the queen begins to perceive Snow White a threat to her hitherto undisputed, unsurpassable beauty, which she learnt to believe secured for her a dominant position in power relations, she begins to notice brown spots on her hands, whiskers over her lips and wrinkles on her face. It exposes her vulnerability and her subsequent cannibalism in eating the supposed lungs and liver (also the heart, in some versions) of *Snow White* foregrounds her desperation to remain the most beautiful in order to retain her relevance in a patriarchal matrix wherein beauty is eulogised and programmed within the

individual's psyche as a weapon to wield power. As the mirror leads her from sight into insight, her 'self' is given the possibility to encounter multiple 'selves' rendered invisible and disqualified as insignificant. She, however, fails to allow reality projected by the mirror to redeem her from the structures of patriarchal power for

One overarching theme of the history of our intimacy with reflective surfaces is that as human beings we use mirrors to reflect our own contradictory nature. On the one hand, we want to see things as they really are, to delve into the mysteries of life. On the other hand, we want the mysteries to remain mysteries. We yearn for definitive knowledge, yet we also revel in imagination, illusion, and magic.⁷

The ambiguous mirror surface capable of simultaneously reflecting and refracting exposes this duality and paradox wherein the queen wishes for 'knowledge' but only through the prism of illusion (in this case, the culturally sanctioned beauty myth) generated by power relations. The consequences of the failure to resolve the contradiction prove catastrophic for the queen. Yet, her fate raises certain pertinently unsettling questions. Is the queen really an evil, wicked woman or the victim of unrealistic expectations coerced upon her? Can she be dismissed as aberrant or interpreted as the inevitable product of a patriarchal ideology, which attempts to tame women through politicization of the female body image? Is she not conveniently demonised to maintain the status quo of the power relations? These are disturbing questions with no easy answers.

The original text of the fairy tale, published by the Grimm brothers and several subsequent variants of the tale, remain largely silent and/or skewed against the queen. While her misdeeds are punished, the cause behind them is never addressed nor a corrective to it provided. In one cinematic version of the tale, the queen is shown to hurl an object at the magic mirror in a fit of rage. As the mirror continues to crack, she begins to age rapidly; her beauty degenerates until she turns into an old hag. The crowd at Snow White's wedding ridicules and humiliates her. Soon, along with the cracked mirror, she disintegrates into a pile of dust. The implication abounds in ironic and psychological insights: Both, her endeavour to meet the patriarchal standards of beauty as well as her loss of beauty become tools to oppress her. In her ridicule by the people on turning into an old hag, her victimization stands complete. But 'power is not exercised simply as an

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obligation or a prohibition on those who “do not have it”; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure on them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them.”⁸ She resists by cracking the mirror but is divested of the power to liberate her identity from the nexus of power relations as she disintegrates, along with the truth-telling mirror, into dust. It serves as a subtle and unnerving warning to women about their fate in case of any attempt to break out of the purview of power relations. In the original text ‘they put a pair of iron shoes into burning coals. They were brought forth with tongs and placed before her. She was forced to step into the red-hot shoes and dance until she fell down dead.’ ‘They’, here, could be interpreted as the society structured by patriarchal power relations and including Snow White who in the apparent inversion of power equations now comes to occupy the queen’s erstwhile position. Her silence at the fate of the queen is deafening and reveals her unwitting compliance and subjection to patriarchy. It suggests her lack of insight and makes her the next potential victim of the beauty myth in the afterlife of the tale. Anne Sexton’s revisionary re-telling of Grimm’s *Snow White*, posits such a possibility wherein Snow White is found ‘referring to [the] mirror as women do’⁹ in the wake of the queen’s death. The mirror changes hands; it now reflects a new face of beauty but beneath the veneer of its ostensible reflection lie the same vicious cycle of the beauty myth, the desire and its resultant insecurity which had entrapped the queen and proved to be her undoing. Snow White, now, stands qualified as the new victim/medium of an oppressive patriarchal ideology and one can only anticipate that it would just be a matter of time when the mirror would begin to, once again, refract the beauty myth constructed through power relations. As the paradigm of power shifts from the queen to Snow White, there is a notion of both the queen and Snow White as representative images for women across cultures, spaces, and time who have been and continue to be subjugated and controlled in the name of society’s definition of what constitutes beauty, particularly in the case of women. The power and the consequent victimization extended from the queen to Snow White, by implication, subjugate and control all women existing within the purview of patriarchy. Extensive and pertinent research of the fairy tales has already established their fascinating roles as one of the earliest tools of learning as well as potent weapons of and against repressive power politics. The tale of *Snow White*, invested with the beauty myth and making use of

the enigmatic and terrifying power of the mirror, has not only effectively performed these functions but continue to find resonance in today's world wherein the beauty myth has acquired monstrous dimensions. Beauty today, is not just an obsession with physical perfection; it is invested with the imperative to be beautiful: that is, the idea of beauty is inextricably linked with love; it is projected as the necessary condition to be loved. In her book *The Beauty Myth*¹⁰ Naomi Wolf predicates that beauty is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact; that it's the beauty myth, that traps modern women in an endless spiral of hope, self-consciousness and self-loathing. What Wolf calls the modern formula for 'selling' the beauty myth traces its source to an age-old patriarchal template, as the one found in *Snow White*. The phenomenon of 'body shaming,' which has recently garnered much attention in the social media, is a reiteration of the reflections and refractions of the queen's magic mirror; the mirror, which has evolved as an ambiguous symbol in human history, allows us to gaze at ourselves, perceive our desires and comprehend the motives hidden within them in order to unfetter 'The face that is gazed on as it gazes'¹¹ from the shackles of delusion and fear constituted through power structures.

Endnotes :

- 1 Anne Sexton, 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs';[https:// www. poets. org /poetsorg/poem/snow-white-and-seven-dwarfs](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/snow-white-and-seven-dwarfs). Accessed 23.07.2016).
- 2 The first known mirror is believed to have been found at Catal Huyuk/Catalhoyuk site in modern-day Turkey. Cf. Mark Pendergrast, *Mirror Mirror: A History of the Human Love Affair with Reflection* (New York: Basic books, 2003), p.3.
- 3 All references to the fairy tale of Snow White are taken from Jacob Grimm, and Wilhelm Grimm, *Little Snow White*; <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm053.html>. Accessed 19.07.2016.
- 4 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), pp. 25-26.
- 5 J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (London:

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- Bloomsbury, 1999), p.157.
- 6 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 26-27.
 - 7 Pendergrast, 'Mirror Mirror: A Historical and Psychological Overview' in *The Book of the Mirror: An Interdisciplinary Collection exploring the Cultural Story of the Mirror*, ed. Miranda Anderson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), pp. 2-12.
 - 8 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 26-27.
 - 9 Sexton, 'Snow White and Seven Dwarfs;' <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/snow-white-and-seven-dwarfs>. Accessed 23.07.2016.
 - 10 Naomi Watts, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).
 - 11 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Mirrors' in *Dreamtigers*; trans. Mildred Boyer and Harold Morland (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964.), pp. 60-61.